

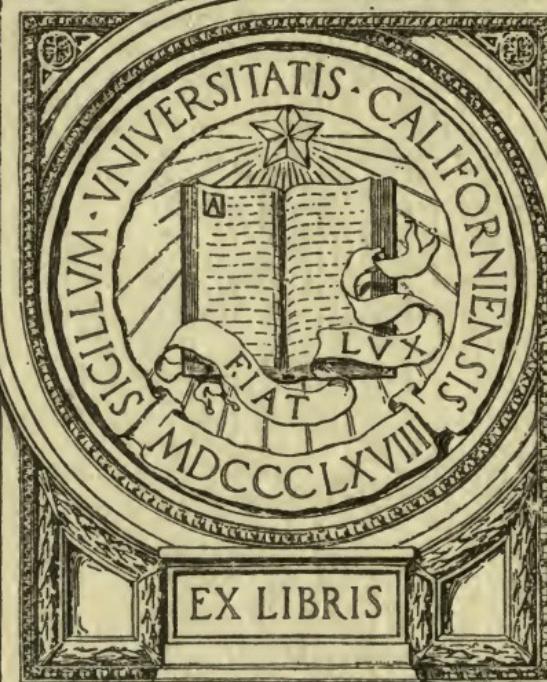
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*LAYS OF THE
RED BRANCH*

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LAYS OF THE RED BRANCH

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LAYS OF THE RED BRANCH

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Entertainments," "Ogham Inscriptions in Ireland,
Wales and Scotland," &c., &c.

With an Introduction

BY

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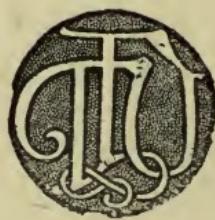
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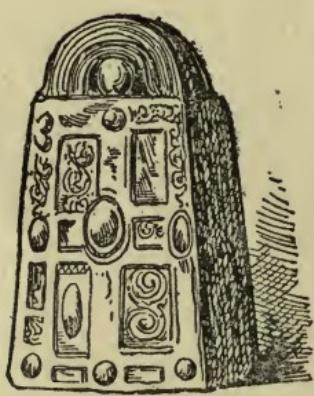


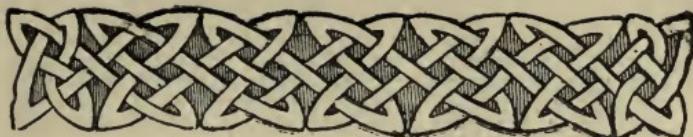
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INTRODUCTION.



THE Literature of Ancient Ireland has for some minds—and those chiefly of high imagination—an indefinable yet powerful fascination.

Nor is this surprising, for it is the product of a Race highly dowered; keenly sensitive to the mystery and magic of Nature, and responsive to the spiritual no less than the heroic in Man.

The Celts of Ireland have been from very early times a literary people. Before they were acquainted with the art of writing, the tales of love, and war, and glory, in which they delighted, were recited by their Bards, and orally preserved in verse. In historic times these were committed to writing, and still exist, in books penned more than a thousand years ago. Their Brehons, or Judges, adjudicated the laws, and recorded the pedigrees so important to a tribal people

We can trace the Celtic occupation of Europe from the Black Sea to the Atlantic, in pre-historic times, by the expressive names which this race gave to places. These evince their poetic feeling for the varied scenery of land and water, and are instinct with “a penetrating lofty beauty.”

Their monuments still exist over most parts of the globe, so far as it was known to the Ancients. These are mainly sepulchral—vast chambers of unhewn stone, Dolmens, Cromlechs, Cairns, or Earthworks covering a central chamber. With the Hero over whose mortal remains such stupendous works have been erected, were interred his most precious possessions, weapons of flint, stone, bronze, and finely polished jade—a material only found in eastern Asia—and likewise ornaments of gold, sometimes associated with beads of amber which must have come from the shores of the Baltic; these indicate the extended range of their early trade or barter.

In the western parts of Europe the Celtic languages are still spoken. Brittany, Wales, the Isle of Man, the Highlands of Scotland, and southern and western Ireland, retain the speech of this primitive race. Nor is it surprising that in Ireland—where the Roman invader never trod—their most characteristic and numerous relics are now to be found. Here are its Pagan seats of regal authority, Tara, Emania, Aileach;

its fortress-Duns—such as Rath Keltar, near Downpatrick, or the Moat of Castletown, near Dundalk : its dry-stone fortresses of immense size and strength—such as Staigue Fort, in Kerry, Dun Ængus and Dun Conor, on the Isles of Aran, off Galway Bay. Here, too, may be inspected its sepulchres of New Grange, Dowth and Knowth near the Boyne, and Slieve-na-Caliagh near the Blackwater, with others too numerous for mention. Ireland possesses also very early Christian remains ; Round Towers, sculptured Crosses, primitive Churches and Cells, Shrines, Bells, and Croziers ; also Ogham-inscribed pillar stones, all deeply interesting to the Archæologist. The country is rich also in gold ornaments of exquisite workmanship ; metal work and leather work of beautiful design ; book covers, and book cases, which evince the artistic taste of the Gael—for so these early inhabitants of the island called themselves.

Above all, the Libraries of Ireland, England, and the Continent, possess innumerable Manuscripts, the work of Irish scribes, many of them exquisitely illuminated. These scribes, trained in the Monastic Schools of Ireland, went forth during the sixth and subsequent centuries as missionaries. They have left their vestiges all over Europe as scholars, civilizers and Christianizers of its then heathen population.

Notwithstanding the ravages of Time, a consider-

able number of MSS. still remain intact both abroad and at home. The late Professor O'Curry in his *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History* (Dublin, 1861), has estimated that existing documents, known to him, would, if printed, fill four thousand pages as large as those in O'Donovan's edition of the *Annals of the Four Masters*; the Ossianic Tales three thousand more; and he computes that the Romances and Miscellaneous Literature would extend to upwards of five thousand pages of that large size. Yet this amount of unpublished matter is a mere fraction—a survival only of that which has been lost by the ravages of Scandinavian Vikings, Norman invaders, civil wars, and confiscations, from which the native race has repeatedly suffered during the last thousand years. A glance at the *National Manuscripts of Ireland*, published in five large volumes by the Government, with its samples of the art of the early illuminators and scribes, will convince the most sceptical that the Gael of Ireland have from primitive times been a learned and artistic race.

The sixth volume of the "New Irish Library" contains a brilliant sketch of Early Gaelic Literature up to the date of the invasions of the Northmen in the ninth century, from the pen of Dr. Douglas Hyde. His translations from the Irish afford samples of

“Gaelic style,” while the preface treats of the obstacles which retard its reception by the English reader.

“The moment the English reader embarks on the sea of native Irish literature,” writes Dr. Hyde, “he finds himself in absolutely unknown waters. It is not merely that the style, the phraseology, the turns of speech, the entire metrical system, are as unlike English as though the whole of Europe lay between the two countries, but its allusions are to things and times and events and cycles and dynasties, strange and unknown to him, and he thus finds himself suddenly launched into a new world, whose existence was by him perfectly unsuspected. He is beset on every side by allusions which he cannot understand, similes he cannot grasp, and ideas which are strange to him. . . . This very contrast lends to Irish literature a peculiar value and a great enchantment, for its fibres to the latest day of its life were twined deep down in the soil of Ireland, knit inseparably to the ancient history, mythology, topography and romance of the island. . . .

“Everyone knows now, or ought to know, that Irish is, like Greek, Latin and Sanscrit, a pure Aryan language, and a highly-inflected and very beautiful one also. . . . The numerous Continental scholars who have studied it (and who now freely admit that the Old Irish ranks near to Sanscrit in importance for the philologist) all speak of it in terms of highest praise.”

Dr. Hyde observes of the primitive literature of Ireland that it “never evolved a drama. . . . What it did produce—and produce nobly and well—was romance.” He asks pertinently :—

“Now who were the authors of these couple of hundred romances? It is a natural question, but one which cannot be answered. There is not a trace of their authorship remaining, if authorship be the right word for what I suspect to have been

the gradual growth of racial, tribal and family history, mixed with Celtic mythology, thus forming stories which were ever being told, and re-told, and polished up, and added to, and which were—some of them—handed down for, perhaps, countless generations ; others recount historical tribal or family doings, magnified during the course of time ; others, again, of more recent date give us, perhaps, fairly accurate accounts of real events. I take it that as soon as bardic schools and colleges began to be formed, there was no class of learning more popular than that which taught the great traditional stories of the various tribes and families of the great Gaelic race, and the intercommunication between the bardic colleges propagated local tradition throughout all Ireland.

“ It is this easy analysis of our early literature into its ante-Christian and its post-Christian elements which makes it so valuable. For, when all spurious accretions have been stripped off, we find in our most ancient tales a genuine picture of Pagan life in Europe, for which we look in vain elsewhere. . . . He (the student) has no other means of estimating what were the social life, feelings and modes of thought of those great races who inhabited so large a part of the old world, Gaul, Belgium, North Italy, parts of Germany, Spain, Switzerland and the British Isles, who burned Rome in its infancy, who plundered Greece, and who colonized Asia Minor. But, in the early Irish romances and historical tales, he sees come to light another standard by which to measure ; through this early Irish peephole he gets a vivid picture of the life and manners of the race in one of its strongholds, from which he may conjecture, and even assume, a good deal with regard to the others. That the pictures of social life and early society drawn in the Irish romances represent phases not common to the Irish alone, but to large portions of that Celtic race which once owned half Europe, may be surmised with something like certainty from the way in which characteristics of the ‘ Celts,’ barely mentioned by Greek and Roman writers, re-appear amongst ourselves in all the intimate detail and fond expansion of romance.”

Such being the admitted difficulties which have made the subject unpopular, it is natural to inquire in what its value and attraction consists? This question will allow of many answers. Dr. Douglas Hyde has alluded to the light reflected from Ireland on the social condition of the pre-historic populations of Europe. Sir Samuel Ferguson has told that—

“The man aspires
To link his present with his country’s past,
And live anew in knowledge of his sires.”

And Mr. Standish O’Grady, in his *Early Bardic Literature, Ireland* (1879), has shown how illuminating is that literature when studied in connection with existing sepulchral and other monuments on Irish soil :—

“But there is one country in Europe in which, by virtue of a marvellous strength and tenacity of the historical intellect and of filial devotedness to the memory of their ancestors, there have been preserved down into the early phases of mediæval civilisation, and then committed to the sure guardianship of manuscript, the hymns, ballads, stories and chronicles, the names, pedigrees, achievements, and even characters, of those ancient kings and warriors over whom those massive cromlechs were erected and great cairns piled. There is not a conspicuous sepulchral monument in Ireland, the traditional history of which is not recorded in our ancient literature, and of the heroes in whose honour they were raised. In the rest of Europe there is not a single barrow, dolmen or cist of which the ancient traditional history is recorded; in Ireland there is hardly one of which it is not. And these histories are in many cases as rich and circumstantial

as that of men of the greatest eminence who have lived in modern times. . . .

“ There is not a King of Ireland, described as such in the ancient annals, whose barrow is not mentioned in these or other compositions, and every one of which may at the present day be identified where the ignorant plebeian or the ignorant patrician has not destroyed them. The early History of Ireland clings around and grows out of the Irish barrows. . . . Her ancient history passed unceasingly into the realm of artistic representation ; the history of one generation became the poetry of the next, until the whole island was illuminated and coloured by the poetry of the bards. Productions of mere fancy and imagination these songs are not, though fancy and imagination may have coloured and shaped all their subject-matter, but the names are names of men and women who once lived and died in Ireland, and over whom their people raised the swelling rath and reared the rocky cromlech. In the sepulchral monuments their names were preserved, and in the performance of sacred rites, and the holding of games, fairs and assemblies in their honour, the memory of their achievements kept fresh till the traditions that clung around these places were enshrined in tales which were finally incorporated in the *Leabhar na Huidhré* and the *Book of Leinster*. . . .

“ Foreigners are surprised to find the Irish claim for their own country an antiquity and a history prior to that of the neighbouring countries. Herein lie the proof and the explanation. The traditions and history of the mound-raising period have in other countries passed away. Foreign conquest, or less intrinsic force of imagination, and pious sentiment have suffered them to fall into oblivion ; but in Ireland they have been all preserved in their original fulness and vigour, hardly a hue has faded, hardly a minute circumstance or articulation been suffered to decay. . . .

“ There is one thing to be learned from all this, which is, that we, at least, should not suffer these ancient monuments to be destroyed, whose history has been thus so astonishingly preserved.

"When the study of the Irish literary records is revived, as certainly will be revived, the old history of each of these raths and cromlechs will be brought again into the light, and one new interest of a beautiful and edifying nature attached to the landscape, and affecting wholly for good the minds of our people.

"Irishmen are often taunted with the fact that their history is yet unwritten, but that the Irish, as a nation, have been careless of their past is refuted by the facts which I have mentioned. A people who alone in Europe preserved, not in dry chronicles alone, but illuminated and adorned with all that fancy could suggest in ballad, and tale, and rude epic, the history of the mound-raising period, are not justly liable to this taunt."

Although Ireland may thus be said to hold those "Keys of the Past," it must be borne in mind that the Celtic element, though less prominent elsewhere, has not been absolutely eradicated, and can still be traced underlying other civilizations. The ancient Britons were not exterminated by their Roman conquerors, who, after holding the island for some four centuries, finally abandoned it. Nor did the Anglo-Saxons—rashly invited by the Britons—do more than expel them from the fertile districts in the east and south to the mountainous regions of the west, where—as in Wales—their ancient language is still spoken. The Normans who subjugated the Saxons in England and the Gael in Ireland, had themselves in their veins an infusion of Celtic blood. It is to that element in the population of England that her literature—in the

opinion of Mr. Matthew Arnold and Mr. Morley—owes some of its finest characteristics.

Mr. Morley, in his *English Writers before Chaucer*, has expressed his views :—

“ The main current of English literature cannot be disconnected from the lively Celtic wit, in which it has one of its sources. The Celts do not form an utterly distinct part of our mixed population. But for early, frequent and various contact with the race that in its half-barbarous days invented Ossian’s dialogues with St. Patrick, and that quickened afterwards the Northmen’s blood in France, Germanic England would not have produced a Shakespeare.”

Mr. Matthew Arnold, in his Lectures *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, eloquently writes :—

“ The Celt’s quick feeling for what is noble and distinguished gave his poetry style ; his indomitable personality gave it pride and passion ; his sensibility and nervous exaltation gave it a better gift still, the gift of rendering with wonderful felicity the magical charm of nature. The forest solitude, the bubbling spring, the wild flowers, are everywhere in romance. They have a mysterious life and grace there ; they are nature’s own children, and utter her secret in a way which makes them something quite different from the woods, waters, and plants of Greek and Latin poetry. Now of this delicate magic, Celtic romance is so pre-eminent a mistress that it seems impossible to believe the power did not come into romance from the Celts. Magic is just the word for it—the magic of nature ; not merely the beauty of nature—that the Greeks and Latins had ; not merely an honest smack of the soil, a faithful realism—that the Germans had ; but the intimate life of nature, her weird power and her fairy charm.”

It is not easy, or even possible, to define wherein lies the charm of the literature of the Gael. It must be *felt*, and it has at the present time, as in the past, found an audience “fit,” though “few.” It is hardly to the credit of our countrymen that scholars from France and Germany are more interested in it than we are, and come to Ireland solely for the purpose of its study. One of these, M. H. D’Arbois de Jubainville, Professeur au Collège de France, in his *Introduction à l'étude de la Littérature Celtique*, speaks of this dawn of letters in Ireland :—

“ Celte époque de prospérité où l'étude de la littérature nationale et celle des lettres latine et chrétiennes florissaient l'une à côté de l'autre en Irlande, se prêtant un mutuel appui et produisant une foule de monuments curieux, depuis en grande partie détruits par les barbares qui ont dévasté l'Irlande au neuvième et au dixième siècle, et par les hommes civilisés qui l'ont mise à feu et à sang au seizième et au dix-septième. Les restes que les bibliothèques nous conservent, de cette vaste littérature peuvent être comparés aux édifices en ruines qui attestent la grandeur de certaines civilisations disparues ; il en subsiste assez pour nous permettre de nous figurer ce que devait être, avant sa destruction, le grand corps dont nous n'apercevons plus que d'incomplets fragments, et pour nous provoquer à en commencer l'étude avec un curiosité qui n'est pas sans mélange d'admiration.”

Probably the cause suggested by Mr. Matthew Arnold in one of his critical essays why “the common sort of readers” patronize a “common sort of literature” only, may be the true one. They “do not

want and could not relish anything better. Even if good literature entirely lost currency with the world," he continues, "it would still be abundantly worth while to continue to enjoy it by oneself."

This literature, both Christian and Pagan, was full of charm for Sir Samuel Ferguson. In early youth he commenced for his own gratification the study of Irish. Although he never mastered the language, he knew enough to glean from Gaelic sources the material which, in after life, he made the ground-work of many of his poems. He was a keen antiquary, and visited in the intervals of professional work those existing remains of the race he loved wherever they were to be found, on hill or dale, on lake or shore, or in museums at home and abroad. His knowledge of manuscripts and books familiarised him with their history and traditions, thus re-doubling his interest in each form of record. Details have been given in his biography, *Sir Samuel Ferguson in the Ireland of his Day*, 1896, and also in his *Ogham Inscriptions in Ireland, Wales and Scotland*, posthumously published in 1887.

Ferguson's poems, included in the present volume, LAYS OF THE RED BRANCH, are illustrative of a very early period in the story of Pagan Ireland, dating as far back as the opening of the Christian era. It may also be called "the Conorian Cycle," for the heroes

whose deeds are commemorated are grouped around the throne of a northern prince, Conor Mac Nessa. Emania (*Emain Macha*), near Armagh, was the Royal capital. The great earthwork—still standing—covers eleven acres of land, and is at present known as “Navan Fort.” Within a short distance is another earthwork, which has given its name of *Creeve Roe* to the adjoining townland. This was the place of assemblage of a chivalrous confraternity, whose heroic achievements, recorded by the Bards, are the themes of these LAYS OF THE RED BRANCH, culled from the poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson.

The foundation of Emania—a fortress of the Celt which has stood for at least two thousand years—belongs to mythical times. Two different stories are told by the Bards in explanation of its name, *Emain Macha*. Both are barbarous and even repulsive ; but, as Sir S. Ferguson remarked in a letter to Professor Blackie—“It is no answer to say these things are intrinsically jejune, or ugly, or barbarous. You will probably agree with me that much of the material of the best classic literature is as crude and revolting as anything in Irish or in Welsh story. Raw material, however, to be converted to the uses of cultivated genius, is not all that we might reasonably hope for from such sources. There are ways of looking at things, and even of expressing thought, in these

deposits of old experience, not to be lightly rejected by a generation whose minds are restless with unsatisfied speculation, and the very clothing of whose ideas begins to show the polish of threadbareness as much as of culture."

The legend, explanatory of the name of Emania, which Sir Samuel versified, forms the first and probably the least attractive in the series of poems concerned with the Conorian Cycle. Terrible as it is, he points out that "it forms a necessary part of the introduction to the great epic romance of the *Tain* or Cattle-spoil of Quelgné."

This poem, the "Twins of Macha," shews the first link in a chain of events which bring out the idea of moral retribution with Aeschylean grandeur. In these events the greatest part is played by Cuchullin, who may be termed the Achilles of the Irish Iliad, and the story of how he received his hero name is narrated in the second of the tales here given, "The Naming of Cuchullin." Setanta, for such was his name as a boy, was the nephew of Conor Mac Nessa, being the son of Dectire, that monarch's sister. With "The Abdication of Fergus Mac Roy" we are introduced to a new series of events. These ultimately flow together, and coalesce with the Cuchullin Cycle to form the great poem of the *Tain-Bo-Cuailgne*, or Cattle-spoil of Quelgné. For Fergus Mac Roy's abdication puts

Conor on the throne—and he it is who sets in motion the forces that work themselves out in the *Tain*. The beautiful tale of Deirdré, the most famous in ancient Irish legend, deals with the tragic issues of a deed of impious treachery performed by King Conor. The Epic of the *Tain*, unhappily not rendered in full detail by Sir Samuel Ferguson, shows how Fergus, in vengeance for the outrage done by Coner to those whom Fergus had pledged himself to protect, allies himself with Maev, the warrior Queen of Connaught, and invades the dominions of Conor with a mighty host. Here is the stage on which the great exploits of Cuchullin were performed. The *Tain*, if Sir S. Ferguson had given it to us in English, would have enlarged on all the topics which are glanced at in his poem of the “Tain Quest,” the latest of the Lays contributed to the present volume. For in this poem, which deals with the recovery in the sixth century of the forgotten Epic, the tragedy of Deirdré, the expedition of Maev, the character and position of Fergus, reputed author of the *Tain*, are all referred to. The Ulster heroes, beloved by Fergus, of whom Cuchullin was chief, his combats at the Ford, the death, by his hand, of his early friend, Ferdia; champions who “in the pauses of the deadly combat kissed”—all these touching and heroic incidents are recorded in the “Tain-Quest,”

and these are the subject matter of the *Tain-Bo-Cuailgne*.

This very early work, preserved in more or less fragmentary form in some of our Irish MSS., has been epitomised by Ferguson in the Introduction to his *Lays of the Western Gael* :—

“ Deirdré, a beautiful virgin, educated by Conor for his own companionship, saw and loved Naisi, who eloped with her, and, dreading the wrath of the king, fled to Scotland, accompanied by his brothers and clansmen. Conor, contemplating the treachery he afterwards practised, acquiesced in the entreaty of his councillors that the sons of Usnach should be pardoned and restored to the service of their country ; and to Fergus was confided the task of discovering their retreat and escorting them to Emania under security of safe-conduct. The hunting-cry of Fergus was heard and recognized by the exiles where they lay in green booths in the solitude of Glen Etive. On their return to Ireland, a temptation prepared for the simple-minded convivial Fergus detached him from his wards ; and Deirdré and the clan Usnach proceeded under the guardianship of his sons, Buino and Illan, to Emania. Here they were lodged in the house of the Red Branch, where, although it soon became apparent that Conor intended their destruction, they repressed all appearance of distrust in their protectors, and calmly continued playing chess until, Buino having been bought over, and Illan slain in their defence, they were at length compelled to sally from the burning edifice, and were put to the sword : Deirdré being seized again into the king’s possession. On this atrocious outrage Fergus took up arms as well to regain his crown as to avenge the abuse of his safe-conduct ; but Cuchullin and the principal chiefs remaining faithful to Conor, the much injured ex-king betook himself with others of the disgusted Ultonian nobles to the protection of Maev and Ailill, the Queen

and King Consort of Connaught. Thus strengthened, the warriors of Maev made frequent incursions into the territories of Conor, in which Keth and Beälcu on the one hand, and Cuchullin and Conall Carnach on the other, were the most renowned actors. After many years of desultory warfare, a pretext for the invasion of the rich plain of Louth arose in consequence of a chief of the territory of Cuailgne having ill-treated the messengers of Maev, sent by her to negotiate the purchase of a notable dun bull, and the great expedition was thereupon organized which forms the subject of the *Tain-Bo-Cuailgne*. The guidance of the invading host, which traversed the counties of Roscommon, Longford and Westmeath, was at first confided to Fergus; and much of the interest of the story turns on the conflict in his breast between his duty towards his adopted sovereign, and his attachment to his old companions in arms and former subjects. On the borders of Cuailgne the invaders were encountered by Cuchullin, who alone detained them by successive challenges to single combat, until Conor and the Ultonian chiefs were enabled to assemble their forces. In these encounters Cuchullin also had the pain of combatting former companions and fellow-pupils in arms; among others, Ferdia, who had received his military education at the same school and under the same amazonian instructress at Dun Sciah, in view of the Cuchullin hills, in Skye. In the respites of their combat the heroes kiss in memory of their early affection. The name of the ford in which they fought (*Ath-Fir diadh*, now Ardee, in the county of Louth) perpetuates the memory of the fallen champion, and helps to fix the locality of these heroic passages. Maev, though ultimately overthrown at the great battle of Slewin, in Westmeath, succeeded in carrying off the spoils of Louth, including the dun bull of Cuailgne; and with Fergus, under the shelter of whose shield she effected her retreat through many sufferings and dangers, returned to Croghan, the Connacian royal residence, near Elphin, in Roscommon."

In his *Hibernian Nights' Entertainments*, written in youth, Ferguson gave a free rendering from the Irish original of "The Death of the Children of Usnach," a story "which hath never been varied during many hundred years of constant tradition, and which hath delighted more princes, and nobles, and honourable audiences, than any other story of Milesian times." It is interspersed with lyrics such as Deirdré's "Farewell to Alba," and her "Lament for the Sons of Usnach." These, when compared with his monodrame, "Deirdre," in the present volume, evidence that the fortunes of this hapless heroine filled his imagination from youth to age. "The Healing of Conall Carnach," included in the following work, introduces us to another hero of the *Tain*. He is the slayer of Mesgedra, whose combat with Conall is the subject of the poem in this series, called by his name. "Mesgedra" has been criticised by Mr. T. W. Lyster with insight and sympathy.

In spite of some barbarous incidents in the story, Mr. Lyster observes that "in nearly all the poems based on Irish heroic myth, he"—Sir S. Ferguson—"is attracted by some moral, or religious, or humane idea, either inherent in the myth or read into it in his imaginative scrutiny. This is one of the notes of distinction in his poetry—poetry revealing in all its traits a nature of high distinction."

“Conary”—the last poem which remains for mention—may seem at first sight to have little connection with the cycle of Conor Mac Nessa, for Tara—not Emania—was the capital of the stately, peaceful monarch who is its subject. Conary was supreme King of Erin—Ireland being a pentarchy—while Conor was only provincial king of the northern province, and Ailill and Maev rulers of the western. In the retinue of Conary, who had been making a peaceful progress through the island, were warriors such as Cormac Conlingas, the son of Conor Mac Nessa, and Conall Carnach, the friend of Cuchullin, then deceased. At a place not far from Dublin, still pointed out as the site of one of the *Bruidins*, or Houses of Hospitality of ancient Ireland, the Royal cavalcade halt for the night, and are attacked by pirates who set fire to the building. The warriors who surround the king sally forth to confront the assailants, but are beglamoured and spell-bound by malignant spirits. Conary is slain. Conall, released at last from their supernatural and evil enchantments, appeals

“To you

Beings of goodness perfect, and to Thee
Great unknown Being who hast made them all,
Take ye compassion on the race of men.”

The prevalence of the supernatural in this work, dealing so largely as it does with the beliefs of the

ethnic Irish—their magic, their superstition, their bondage to spiritual beings who walk the earth—gives a mysterious eeriness to “Conary.” It has been pronounced by competent judges to be among the best of Ferguson’s poems. Mr. W. B. Yeats goes further, for he says, when comparing him with contemporary poets :—“ Ferguson had the more ample imagination, the more epic aim. His ‘Vengeance of the Welshmen of Tirawley’ is the best Irish ballad, and his ‘Conary,’ a long battle-tale in blank verse, the best Irish poem of any kind.”

Ardently attached to the land of his birth, and undeterred by the apathy of the public, Ferguson persistently devoted his genius to the service of Ireland. Fully aware that he sacrificed present popularity in so doing, he continued to make Irish themes the subject of his verse and prose, and was willing to forego that appreciation from his contemporaries so grateful to a poet and man of letters. In the epistle to Professor Blackie, already spoken of, he writes :—“The repugnance to the subject amongst English men of letters—from whom our upper classes have borrowed all they know or feel in the matter—is not unnatural. A man who fancies his education finished does not like to learn a new language and a new classical dictionary, with the view merely to the expression of critical opinion for an audience at

present very limited in number, and probably better read in the subject than himself." And in Ferguson's Inaugural Address, in 1882, as President of the Royal Irish Academy, he speaks of the work the Academy had undertaken in the transcription in fac-simile of our most ancient Irish manuscripts thus placed within reach of Continental scholars, and glories in the forecast that "within the next ten years the whole bulk of the old native Irish literature will be in the hands of scholars all over the world." In this hope his patriot heart exulted. "If there ever was a legitimate hope at the bottom of scholastic effort," he continued, "it animated the men who brought these things together and put them in their present posture and capacity for use. . . . To their hands mainly has been committed the guardianship of the materials out of which such a literature as I have been contemplating may be evolved."

This aspiration was his to the last. It is thus expressed in a letter to Dr. Whitley Stokes :—"I see old friends falling and failing around me, and must be content to go my ways, leaving undone a great deal that I ought to have done; but I have lived, and loved, and done something if not all I might, and will bequeath, in all likelihood to you, or possibly to one or two others, the duty and, I hope, the reward of making the voice of this despised people of ours heard high up Olympus."

It is hoped that Sir Samuel Ferguson's poems of the Conorian Era, LAYS OF THE RED BRANCH, included in this volume of the "New Irish Library," now arranged in the sequence he himself suggested, may assist the reader in the realization of the characters and actions ascribed to their heroes in the Bardic Chronicles of ancient Ireland.

M. C. FERGUSON.

20 NORTH GREAT GEORGE'S ST., DUBLIN,
June 17th, 1897.





LAYS OF THE RED BRANCH.



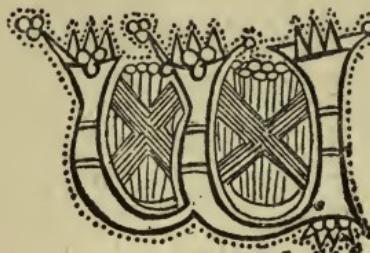
THE TWINS OF MACHA :

A LAY OF THE WESTERN GAEL.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

[The earthworks called the Navan, near Armagh, are the remains of the old fortress-dwelling of the petty kings of Ulster. For so insignificant a place, it possesses what few other sites in Western Europe can boast of. It has a history, more or less fabulous, extending from the year 330 before, to the year 336 after Christ. Its greatest glories are associated with the days of Conor son of Nessa, in whose time, by one account, it received the name by which it has since been known; for it is to be noted that Navan is the abbreviated form of *An-Emain-Macha*, rendered in this legend The Twins of Macha. Terrible as this story is, it is not repulsive, like that of the earlier Macha, who in the other legend is made the original founder, and it forms a necessary part of the introduction to the great epic romance of the Tain or Cattle-spoil of Quelgné. Cuchullin would not have had the opportunity of winning glory by defending the passes of Ulster singlehanded as he is there represented to have done, had not Conor and his powerful chiefs been disabled for the field by the plague visited on them in vengeance of Macha's sufferings. The original is a good example of that conciseness and simplicity united with dramatic power which characterises the *Dinnseanchus* class of poems.]

THE TWINS OF MACHA.



HENCE *Emain Macha* ?

And the pangs intense
That long were wont to
plague the Ultonians,
whence ?

Not hard to tell. Once,
ere that pest began,

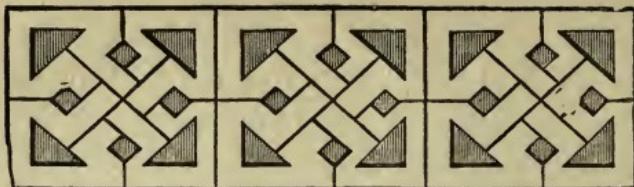
Crunn of the Herds, the son of Agnoman,
Tending his flocks dwelt lonely in the wild.
Dead was his wife : and many a squalid child,
Ill-cared for, clamoured in the dwelling bare.
Now, on a day, when sitting sadly there,
Crunn was aware a woman stood beside,
Of gracious aspect, sweet and dignified.
She, as familiar there had been her life,
At once assumed the office of the wife :
Unasked, presided ; dealt the children bread ;
And drew their loves forth, in the mother's stead ;
Long while she tarried. Neither wholesome food,
Nor seemly raiment, nor aught else of good
Wherewith the housewife's hand makes glad a home,
Was wanting with them ; till the time was come
When Ulaidh all were wont to make repair
With annual pomp to celebrate their Fair,
Thither they flock ; man, woman, youth, and maid ;
And, with the others, Crunn, his limbs arrayed
In festive garb, to go. Fear seized her soul.
“ Ah, go not, rash one ! Thou wilt ne'er control

"Some word ill-timed, may mar our life's content."

"Tush! Fear me not," said Crunn; and, jocund, went.

The fair is filled. The grooms of Conor lead
 The royal car and coursers o'er the mead.
 The woods and lawns with loud applauses ring;
 The flattering courtiers buzz about. "The thing
 "Lives not, for swiftness, that can near them come."
 "Swifter," said Crunn, "my own good wife at home."
 Scarce said,—the wretch, by wrathful Conor caught,
 Is captive. Tidings to the wife are brought.
 "Woe's me," she cried, "must aid him now, and I
 "So soon to bear my own maternity!"
 "Woe thee, indeed!" the savage grooms return.
 "Make good his boasting, or prepare his urn."
 "As mothers bore you, spare!" she cries aghast;
 "Or yield me respite till my pains are past."
 No respite. "Good, then, if it must be so,
 "My pains shall work you, men of Ulster, woe,
 "Now and hereafter." Brought before the King—
 "Thy name?" "My name,—our name,—the name
 shall cling
 "To this thy fair-green and thy palace-hall
 "Till the just God give judgment upon all;—
 "MACHA, my name; daughter of Sanrad, son
 "Of Imbad. Now, release him, and I run."

She ran; the steeds contended. Long ere they
 Attained the goal, already there, she lay,
 A mother, dying. Twin the birth. So came
 Of *Emain Macha*, "Macha's Twins," the name.



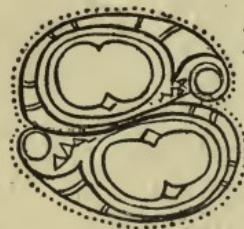
THE NAMING OF CUCHULLIN:

A LAY OF THE WESTERN GAEL.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

[One of the stories introductory to the *Tain*, and, of them all, the most dramatic. The name (*Cu-Chullain*) signifies the Hound of Cullan. *Cu*, in this meaning, is a common element of Celtic proper names. Whether the armourer of Slieve Gullen was another Wayland Smith may amuse the ethnological enquirer. He will at least live in the renown of his chain-hound as long as Celtic literature endures.]

CONOR.



ETANTA, if bird-nesting in the
woods

And ball-feats on the play-green
please thee not

More than discourse of warrior and
of sage,

And sight of warrior-weapons in the forge,
I offer an indulgence. For we go,—
Myself, my step-sire Fergus, and my Bard,—
To visit Cullan, the illustrious smith
Of Quelgné. Come thou also if thou wilt.

SETANTA.

Ask me not, good oh Conor, yet to leave
The play-green ; for the ball-feats just begun
Are those which most delight my playmate-youths,
And they entreat me to defend the goal :
But let me follow ; for, the chariot-tracks
Are easy to discern ; and much I long
To hear discourse of warrior and of sage,
And see the nest that hatches deaths of men,
The tongs a-flash, and Cullan's welding blow.

CONOR.

Too late the hour ; too difficult the way.
Set forward, drivers : give our steeds the goad.

CULLAN.

Great King of Emain, welcome. Welcome, thou,
Fergus, illustrious step-sire of the King :
And, Seer and Poet, Cathbad, welcome too.
Behold the tables set, the feast prepared.
Sit. But, before I cast my chain-hound loose,
Give me assurance that ye all be in.
For, night descends ; and perilous the wild ;
And other watchman none of house or herds,
Here, in this solitude remote from men,
Own I, but one hound only. Once his chain
Is loosened, and he makes three bounds at large
Before my door-posts, after fall of night,
There lives not man nor company of men

Less than a cohort, shall, within my close
Set foot of trespass, short of life or limb.

CONOR.

Yea ; all are in. Let loose, and sit secure.
Good are thy viands, Smith, and strong thine ale.
Hark, the hound growling.

CULLAN.

Wild dogs are abroad.

FERGUS.

Not ruddier the fire that laps a sword
Steel'd for a king, oh Cullan, than thy wine.
Hark, the hound baying.

CULLAN.

Wolves, belike, are near.

CATHBAD.

Not cheerfuller the ruddy forge's light
To wayfarer benighted, nor the glow
Of wine and viands to a hungry man,
Than look of welcome pass'd from host to guest.
Hark, the hound yelling ! -

CULLAN.

Friends, arise and arm !
Some enemy intrudes ! Tush ! 'tis a boy.

SETANTA.

Setanta here, the son of Suäiltam.

CONOR.

Setanta, whom I deemed on Emain green
Engaged at ball-play, on our track, indeed !

SETANTA.

Not difficult the track to find, oh King,
But difficult, indeed, to follow home.
Cullan, 'tis evil welcome for a guest
This unwarn'd onset of a savage beast,
Which, but that 'gainst the stone-posts of thy gate
I three times threw him, leaping at my throat,
And, at the third throw, on the stone-edge, slew,
Had brought on thee the shame indelible
Of bidden guest, at his host's threshold, torn.

CONOR.

Yea, he was bidden : it was I myself
Said, as I passed him with the youths at play,
This morning, Come thou also if thou wilt.
But little thought I,—when he said the youths
Desired his presence still to hold the goal,
Yet asked to follow ; for he said he longed
To hear discourse of warrior and of sage,
And see the nest that hatches deaths of men,
The tongs a-flash, and Cullan's welding blow ;—
That such a playful, young, untutor'd boy
Would come on this adventure of a man.

CULLAN.

I knew not he was bidden ; and I asked,
Ere I cast loose, if all the train were in.
But, since thy word has made the boy my guest,—
Boy, for his sake who bade thee to my board,
I give thee welcome : for thine own sake, no.
For thou hast slain my servant and my friend,
The hound I loved, that, fierce, intractable
To all men else, was ever mild to me.
He knew me ; and he knew my uttered words,
All my commandments, as a man might know :
More than a man, he knew my looks and tones
And turns of gesture, and discerned my mind,
Unspoken, if in grief or if in joy.
He was my pride, my strength, my company,
For I am childless ; and that hand of thine
Has left an old man lonely in the world.

SETANTA.

Since, Cullan, by mischance, I've slain thy hound,
So much thy grief compassion stirs in me,
Hear me pronounce a sentence on myself.
If of his seed there liveth but a whelp
In Uladh, I will rear him till he grow
To such ability as had his sire
For knowing, honoring, and serving thee.
Meantime, but give a javelin in my hand,
And a good buckler, and there never went
About thy bounds, from daylight-gone till dawn

Hound watchfuller, or of a keener fang
Against intruder, than myself shall be.

CULLAN.

A sentence, a just sentence.

CONOR.

Not myself
Hath made award more righteous. Be it so.
Wherefore what hinders that we give him now
His hero-name, no more Setanta called,
But now Cuchullin, chain-hound of the Smith ?

SETANTA.

Setanta I, the son of Suäiltam,
Nor other name assume I, or desire.

CATHBAD.

Take, son of Suäiltam, the offered name.

SETANTA.

Setanta, I. Setanta let me be.

CONOR.

Mark Cathbad.

FERGUS.

'Tis his seer-fit.

CATHBAD.

To my ears

There comes a clamour from the rising years,
The tumult of a torrent passion-swollen,
Rolled hitherward ; and, mid its mingling noises,
I hear perpetual voices
Proclaim to laud and fame
The name,
UCHULLIN !

Hound of the Smith, thy boyish vow
Devotes thy manhood, even now,
To vigilance, fidelity, and toil :
'Tis not alone the wolf, fang-bare to snatch,
Not the marauder from the lifted latch
Alone, thy coming footfall makes recoil.
The nobler service thine to chase afar
Seditious tumult and intestine war,
Envy, and unfraternal hate,
From all the households of the state :
To hunt, untiring, down
The vices of the lewd-luxurious town,
And all the brood
Of Wrong and Rapine, ruthlessly pursued,
Forth of the kingdom's bounds exterminate.

Thine the out-watch, when, down the darkening skies
The coming thunder of invasion rolls ;
When doubts and faint replies
Dissolve in dread the shaken People's souls ;

And Panic waits, behind her bolted gate,
The unseen stroke of Fate.

Unbolt ! Come forth ! I hear
His footsteps drawing near,
Who smites the proud ones, who the poor delivers :
I hear his wheels hurl through the dashing rivers :
They fill the narrowing glen ;
They shake the quaking causeways of the fen ;
They roll upon the moor ;
I hear them at the door :—
Lauds to the helpful Gods, the Hero-Givers,
Here stands he, man of men !

Great are the words he speaks ;
They move through hearts of kindreds and of nations.
At each clear sentence, the unseemly pallor
Of fear's precipitate imaginations
Avoids the bearded cheeks,
And to their wonted stations
On every face
Return the generous, manly-mantling colour
And reassuring grace
Of fixed obedience, discipline, and patience,
Heroic courage, and protecting valour.

The old true-blooded race shall not be left
Of captaincy bereft ;
No, not although the ire of angry heaven
Grow hot against it, even.

For Gods in heaven there are
 Who punish not alone the omitted pray'r,
 Who punish not alone the slighted sacrifice :
 Humanity itself, at deadly price,
 Has gained admission to the juster skies,
 And vindicates on man man's inhumanities.
 See how the strong ones languish
 And groan in woman-anguish,
 Who in the ardor of their sports inhuman
 Heard not the piteous pleadings of the woman.

CONOR.

Ah me, the fatal foot-race ! Macha's pangs
 Do yet torment us.

FERGUS.

Evil was the deed.
 Happy was I who did not witness it,
 And happy you, I absent.

CATHBAD.

On their benches,
 Even in the height and glory of the revel,
 Struck prone, they writhe :
 Who now will man the trenches ?
 Who, on the country's borders,
 Confront the outland sworders,—
 King, priest, and lord, a swathe before the scythe
 Of plague, laid level ?

He,—he,—no looker-on
At heaven-abhorred impieties is he,
The pure, the stainless son
 Of Dectiré,
The wise, the warlike, the triumphant one
Who holds your forest-passes and your fords
 Against the alien hordes,
Till from beneath heaven's slow-uplifted scourge
 The chastened kings emerge,
And, grappling once again to manly swords,
Roll the invader-hosts
For ever from your coasts.

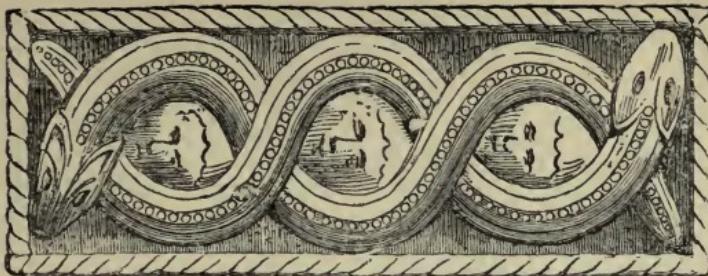
Great is the land and splendid :
The borders of the country are extended :
The extern tribes look up with wondering awe
And own the central law.
Fair show the fields, and fair the friendly faces
Of men in all their places.
With song and chosen story, —
With game and dance, with revelries and races,
 Life glides on joyous wing—
The tales they tell of love and war and glory,
Tales that the soft-bright daughters of the land
Delight to understand,
 The songs they sing
To harps of double string,
To gitterns and new reeds,
 Are of the glorious deeds
Of young Cuchullin in the Quelgnian foray.

Take, son of Suäiltam, the offered name.
For at that name the mightest of the men
Of Erin and of Alba shall turn pale :
And, of that name, the mouths of all the men
Of Erin and of Alba shall be full.

SETANTA.

Yea, then ; if that be so—Cuchullin here !





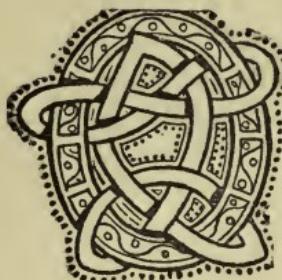
THE ABDICATION OF FERGUS MAC ROY.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

[Conor, King of Ulster, contemporary and rival of Maev, Queen of Connaught, reigned at Emania (now the Navan), near Armagh, about the commencement of the Christian era. He owed his first accession to the monarchy to the arts of his mother Nessa, on whom Fergus, his predecessor in the kingly office and step-father, doated so fondly that she had been enabled to stipulate, as a condition of bestowing her hand, that Fergus should abdicate for a year in favour of her youthful son. The year had been indefinitely prolonged by the fascinations of Nessa aided by the ability of Conor, who, although he concealed a treacherous and cruel disposition under attractive graces of manners and person, ultimately became too popular to be displaced; and Fergus, whose nature disinclined him to the labours of Government, had acquiesced in accepting as an equivalent the excitements of war and chase, and the unrestricted pleasure of the revel. Associating with Cuchullin, Conall Carnach, Naisi, son of Usnach, and the other companions of the military order of the Red Branch, he long remained a faithful supporter of the throne of his step-son, eminent for his valour, generosity, and fidelity, as well as for his accomplishments as a hunter and a poet.

At length occurred the tragedy which broke up these genial associations, and drove Fergus into the exile in which he died.]

THE ABDICATION OF FERGUS MAC ROY.



NCE, ere God was crucified,
I was King o'er Uladh wide :
King, by law of choice and birth,
O'er the fairest realm of Earth.

I was head of Rury's race ;
Emain was my dwelling place ;
Right and Might were mine ; nor less
Stature, strength, and comeliness.

Neither lacked I love's delight,
Nor the glorious meeds of fight.
All on earth was mine could bring
Life's enjoyment to a king.

Much I loved the jocund chase,
Much the horse and chariot race :
Much I loved the deep carouse,
Quaffing in the Red Branch House.

But in Council call'd to meet,
Loved I not the judgment seat ;
And the suitors' questions hard
Won but scantily my regard.

Rather would I, all alone,
Care and state behind me thrown,
Walk the dew through showery gleams
O'er the meads, or by the streams,

Chanting, as the thoughts might rise,
Unimagined melodies ;
While with sweetly-pungent smart
Secret happy tears would start.

Such was I, when in the dance,
Nessa did bestow a glance,
And my soul that moment took
Captive in a single look.

I am but an empty shade,
Far from life and passion laid ;
Yet does sweet remembrance thrill
All my shadowy being still.

Nessa had been Fathna's spouse,
Fathna of the Royal house,
And a beauteous boy had borne him
Fourteen summers did adorn him :

Yea ; thou deem'st it marvellous,
That a widow's glance should thus
Turn from lure of maidens' eyes
All a young king's fantasies.

Yet if thou hadst known but half
Of the joyance of her laugh,
Of the measures of her walk,
Of the music of her talk,

Of the witch'ry of her wit,
Even when smarting under it,—

Half the sense, the charm, the grace,
Thou hadst worshipp'd in my place.

And, besides, the thoughts I wove
Into songs of war and love,
She alone of all the rest
Felt them with a perfect zest.

“Lady, in thy smiles to live
Tell me but the boon to give,
Yea, I lay in gift complete
Crown and sceptre at thy feet.”

“Not so great the boon I crave :
Hear the wish my soul would have ; ”
And she glanc'd a loving eye
On the stripling standing by :—

“Conor is of age to learn ;
Wisdom is a king's concern ;
Conor is of royal race,
Yet may sit in Fathna's place.

“Therefore, king, if thou wouldest prove
That I have indeed thy love,
On the judgment seat permit
Conor by thy side to sit,

“That by use the youth may draw
Needful knowledge of the Law.”
I with answer was not slow,
“Be thou mine, and be it so.”

I am but a shape of air,
Far removed from love's repair ;
Yet, were mine a living frame
Once again I'd say the same.

Thus, a prosperous wooing sped,
Took I Nessa to my bed,
While in council and debate
Conor daily by me sate.

Modest was his mien in sooth,
Beautiful the studious youth,
Questioning with earnest gaze
All the reasons and the ways

In the which, and why because,
Kings administer the Laws.
Silent so with looks intent
Sat he till the year was spent.

But the strifes the suitors raised
Bred me daily more distaste,
Every faculty and passion
Sunk in sweet intoxication.

Till upon a day in court
Rose a plea of weightier sort :
Tangled as a briary thicket
Were the rights and wrongs intricate

Which the litigants disputed,
Challenged, mooted, and confuted ;

Till, when all the plea was ended,
Naught at all I comprehended.

Scorning an affected show
Of the thing I did not know,
Yet my own defect to hide,
I said "Boy-judge, thou decide."

Conor, with unalter'd mien,
In a clear sweet voice serene,
Took in hand the tangled skein
And began to make it plain.

As a sheep-dog sorts his cattle,
As a king arrays his battle,
So, the facts on either side
He did marshal and divide.

Every branching side-dispute
Traced he downward to the root
Of the strife's main stem, and there
Laid the ground of difference bare.

Then to scope of either cause
Set the compass of the laws,
This adopting, that rejecting,—
Reasons to a head collecting,—

As a charging cohort goes
Through and over scatter'd foes
So, from point to point, he brought
Onward still the weight of thought

Through all error and confusion,
Till he set the clear conclusion
Standing like a king alone,
All things adverse overthrown,

And gave judgment clear and sound :—
Praises fill'd the hall around ;
Yea, the man that lost the cause
Hardly could withhold applause.

By the wondering crowd surrounded
I sat shamefaced and confounded.
Envious ire awhile oppress'd me
Till the nobler thought possess'd me ;

And I rose, and on my feet
Standing by the judgment-seat,
Took the circlet from my head,
Laid it on the bench, and said,

“ Men of Uladh, I resign
That which is not rightly mine,
That a worthier than I
May your judge's place supply.

“ Lo, it is no easy thing
For a man to be a king
Judging well, as should behove
One who claims a people's love.

“ Uladh's judgment-seat to fill
I have neither wit nor will.

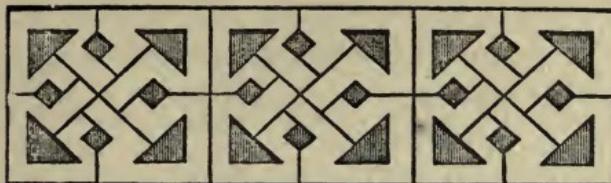
One is here may justly claim
Both the function and the name.

"Conor is of royal blood ;
Fair he is ; I trust him good ;
Wise he is we all may say
Who have heard his words to-day.

"Take him therefore in my room,
Letting me the place assume—
Office but with life to end—
Of his councillor and friend."

So young Conor gained the crown ;
So I laid the kingship down ;
Laying with it as it went
All I knew of discontent.





MESGEDRA :

A LAY OF THE WESTERN GAEL.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

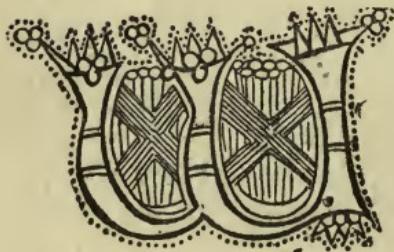
[Irish heroic tradition revolves in two chief cycles, separated by an interval of about two centuries and a-half. In the first, Conor, King of Ulster, living about the commencement of the Christian era, occupies the central place; surrounded by Cuchulain, Conall Carnach, and the heroes of the Red Branch. The fortunes of Deirdre and the sons of Usnach connect him with Scotland; those of his Amazonian rival, Maev, with Connaught, and those of Curi and Blanaid with Munster. In the second cycle, Cormac son of Art must be regarded as the central figure, though eclipsed by the more heroic forms of Finn and Ossian. We are here in the third century, and the dawn of the coming change to Christianity tinges all the characters with a greater softness and humanity, as in the romance of the elopement of Dermid and Grania, and in many of the Ossianic fragments. But the better defined and more characteristic forms of grandeur, with the stronger accompaniments of pity and terror, must be sought for in the earlier story. There, we are amongst the *rudera* of such a barbaric kind of literature as the great tragedians turned to immortal dramas in Greece, and Ovid converted into beautiful legends in Italy. In the Conorian cycle, the egg of Leda, so to speak, is the trophy taken from the dead Mesgedra by Conall Carnach, under the circumstances which form the subject of this piece. It furnishes the missile with which the main action of the cycle is wound up in the assassination of Conor by the slinger Keth, as related in the "Healing of Conall Carnach" (*Lays of*

the Western Gael). If we inquire into its nature, or ask how the trophy of a dead man could supply materials for a missile from a sling, we enter on shocking details such as deform the traditions of this as well as every other old country which has preserved its literary rudiments. A British King built a prison for his captives of a concrete composed of lime and the bones of his enemies. As late as the beginning of the 13th century the chess-men of the O'Neills of Tyrone were formed of the polished *tibiae* of the men of Leinster. But these revolting features need no more repel us from seeing what is behind, than Medea's cauldron or the supper of Thyestes should induce us to ignore the materials supplied by the Classical Dictionary. The oppressive exactions of the Bards in their visitations (the origin, probably, of the Herald's visitations of later times), form the subject of a note to "Congal" (p. 175), where the same abuses are shown to exist at the present day among the native tribes of India.

—

Ill fare it still with lay-profaning Bard
 Who, heedless of the heavenly gift sincere,
 Sings, or sings not, to purchase wealth's reward
 From flattered Pride or tributary Fear.]

MESGEDRA.



HEN glades were green
 where Dublin stands
 to-day,
 And limpid Liffey, fresh
 from wood and wold,

Bridgeless and fordless, in the lonely Bay
 Sank to her rest on sands of stainless gold ;

Came Bard Atharna with his spoils of song
 From rich, reluctant lords of Leinster wrung ;
 Flocks and fat herds, a far-extending throng,
 Bondsmen and handmaids beautiful and young :

And,—for the dusky deeps might ill be pass'd,
And he impatient to secure his store,—
A hurdle-causeway o'er the river cast,
And bore his booty to the further shore :

Which ill-enduring, Leinster's king, the brave
Mesgedra, following in an angry quest,
On Tolka bank of damsel and of slave
Despoiled the spoiler now no more a guest ;

Who, being bard and ministering priest
Of those vain demons then esteemed divine,
Invoked a curse on Leinster, man and beast,
With rites of sacrifice and rhymes malign ;

And sang so loud his clamorous call to war
That all the chiefs of bard-protecting fame
Throughout Ulidia, arming near and far,
Came, and, to aid him, Conall Carnach came ;

And, where the city now sends up her vows
From holy Patrick's renovated fane,
(Small surmise then that one of Conall's house
Should there, thereafter, such a work ordain),

Joined Leinster battle : till the southern lords,
Their bravest slain or into bondage led,
At sunset broke before the Red Branch swords,
And, last, Mesgedra climbed his car and fled.

Alone, in darkness, of one hand forlorn,
Naas-ward all night he held his journey back

Through wood and fen, till ill-befriending morn
Showed him fell Conall following on his track.

So chanced it, as the doleful daylight broke,
That, wandering devious with disordered rein,
His steeds had reached beside the Sacred Oak
On Liffey's bank, above the fords of Clane.

Glad to the Tree-God made he grateful vows
Who deigned that green asylum to bestow ;
Kissed the brown earth beneath the moss-green boughs,
And waited, calm, the coming of his foe.

He, as a hawk, that, in a housewife's coop
Spying his quarry, stoops upon the wing,
Came on apace, and, when in middle swoop,
Declining sidelong from the sacred ring,

Wheeled, swerving past the consecrated bounds :—
Then thus, between him and the asylum'd man,
While nearer brush'd he still in narrowing rounds,
The grave, unfriendly parle of death began.

“ Come forth, Mesgedra, from the sheltering tree,
And render fight : 'tis northern Conall calls.”

“ Not from an equal combat do I flee,
O Conall, to these green, protecting halls ;

“ But, mutilated, weak from many wounds,
Here take I sanctuary, where none will dare
With impious wheel o'erdrive my measured bounds,
Or cast a weapon through the spell-wall'd air.”

“ No impious man am I ; I fear the Gods ;
 My wheels thy sacred precinct do but graze ;
 Nor, in the strife I challenge, ask I odds,
 But lot alike to each of death or praise.”

“ See, then, one arm hangs idly by my side :
 Let, now, one answering arm put also by
 From share of battle, to thy belt be tied ;
 So shall thy challenge soon have meet reply.”

Then Conall loosed his war-belt’s leathern band ;
 Buckle and belt above his arm he closed ;
 And, single-handed, to the single hand
 Of maimed Mesgedra, stood in fight opposed.

They fought, with clashing intermixture keen
 Of rapid sword-strokes, till Mesgedra’s blade,
 Belt and brass corslet glancing sheer between,
 Wide open all the trammelling closure laid.

“ Respect my plight : two-handed chief, forbear ! ”
 “ Behold, I spare ; I yield to thy appeal ;
 And bind this hand again ; but, well beware
 Again it owe not freedom to thy steel ! ”

Again they fought, with close-commingling hail
 Of swifter sword-strokes, till the fated brand
 Of doom’d Mesgedra, glancing from the mail,
 Again cut loose the dread, man-slaughtering hand.

No prayer might now hot Conall’s fire assuage ;
 No prayer was uttered ; from his scattered toils

Bounding in headlong homicidal rage,
He flew, he threw, he slew, and took the spoils :

Then up, all glorying, all imbrued in gore,
Sprang to the chariot-seat, and north amain
Chariots and steeds and ghastly trophy bore
Through murmuring Liffey, o'er the fords of Clane.

There, softly glancing down the hawthorn glades,
Like phantom of the dawn and dewy air,
There met him, with a troop of dames and maids,
A lovely woman delicate and fair.

They, at their vision of the man of blood,
Rightward and left fled fluttering in alarm ;
She in his pathway innocently stood
As one who thinks not, and who fears not, harm.

“Who thou, and whence, and who the woman-train?”
“Buäna, King Mesgedra’s wife, am I,
From vows returning sped at Tlacta’s fane :
These dames and maids my serving company.

“And, one moon absent, long the time appears
Till back in Naas’s halls I lay at rest
My dreams ill-omening and my woman’s fears
That daily haunt me, on my husband’s breast.”

“Mount here. Thy husband speaks his will through me.”
“Through thee ! Thy token of my husband’s will?”
“The royal car, the royal coursers see :
Perchance there rests a surer token still.”

“ My king Mesgedra is a bounteous lord,
 And many a war-car doth his chariot-pen,
 And many a swift steed do his stalls afford
 For oft bestowal upon divers men.”

“ See then,” he said, “ my certain warrant here.”
 Ah, what a deed ! and showed the severed head.
 She paled, she sickened with a mortal fear,
 Reached her white arms and sank before him, dead.

No passing swoon was hers : he saw her die ;
 Saw death’s pale signet set on cheek and brow :—
 Up through his raging breast there rose a sigh ;
 And, “ Sure,” he said, “ a loving wife wast thou !

“ And I—my deeds to-day shall live in song :
 Bards in the ears of feasting kings shall tell
 How keen Mesgedra cut the trammelling thong,
 And unbound Conall used his freedom well.

“ For, what I’ve done, by rule of warrior-law
 Well was I justified and bound to do ;
 And poets hence a precedent shall draw
 For future champion-compacts just and true.

“ Done, not because I love the sight of blood,
 Or, uninstructed, rather would destroy
 Than cherish ; or prefer the whirling mood
 Of battle’s turbulent and dreadful joy

“ To peaceful life’s mild temper ; but because
 Things hideous, which the natural sense would shun,

Are, by the sanction of religious laws,
Made clean, and pure, and righteous to be done.

“ Ye, in whose name these awful laws are given,
Forgive the thought this woman’s looks have raised ;—
Are broken hearts acceptable to Heaven ?
Is God by groans of anguish rightly praised ?

“ I, at your law’s commandment, slew her lord,
And, at your law’s commandment, would have borne
Herself, a captive, to a land abhorr’d,
To spend her widowhood in pain and scorn.

“ But now, since friendlier death has shut her eyes
From sight of bondage in an alien home,
No law forbids to yield her obsequies,
Or o’er her raise the green sepulchral dome.

“ Or—for her love was stronger than her life—
To place beside her, in her narrow bed,—
It’s lawful tribute rendered to my knife—
The much-loved, life-lamented, kingly head.

“ No law forbids—all sanguinary dues
Paid justly—that the heart-wrung human vow
Your sterner rites, dread Deities, refuse,
Some gentler Demon’s ritual may allow :

“ That yet, ere Time of Mankind make an end,
Some mightier Druid of our race may rise ;
Some milder Messenger from Heaven descend ;
And Earth, with nearer knowledge of the Skies,

“ See, past your sacrificers’ grisly bands,
 Past all the shapes that servile souls appal,
 With fearless vision, from a thousand lands,
 One great, good God behind and over all.

“ Raise, then, her mound”: the gathering hosts he spake
 That, thronging to o’ertake their venturous king,
 Poured from the ford through fen and crackling brake,
 And hailed their hero in acclaiming ring :—

“ Raise, too, her stone, conspicuous far and near ;
 And let a legend on the long stone tell,
 ‘Behold, there lies a tender woman here,
 Who, surely, loved a valiant husband well.’

“ And let the earth-heap’d, grass-renewing tomb
 A time-long token eloquent remain
 Of Pity and of Love for all who come
 By murmuring Liffey and the banks of Clane.”

Delicious Liffey ! from thy bosoming hills
 What man who sees thee issuing strong and pure,
 But with some wistful, fresh emotion fills,
 Akin to Nature’s own clear temperature ?

And, haply, thinks :—on this green bank ’twere sweet
 To make one’s mansion, sometime of the year ;
 For Health and Pleasure on these uplands meet,
 And all the isle’s amenities are here.

Hither the merry music of the chase
 Floats up the festive borders of Kildare ;

And slim-bright steeds extending in the race
Are yonder seen, and camping legions there.

These coverts hold the wary-gallant fox ;
There the park'd stag waits his enlarging day ;
And there, triumphant o'er opposing rocks,
The shooting salmon quivers through thy spray.

The heath, the fern, the honey-fragrant furze
Carpet thy cradling steeps : thy middle flow
Laves lawn and oak-wood : o'er thy downward course
Laburnums nod and terraced roses blow.

To ride the race, to hunt, to fowl, to fish,
To do and dare whate'er brave youth would do,
A fair fine country as the heart could wish,
And fair the brown-clear river running through.

Such seemest thou to Dublin's youth to-day,
Oh clear-dark Liffey, mid the pleasant land ;
With life's delights abounding, brave and gay,
The song, the dance, the softly yielded hand,

The exulting leap, the backward-flying fence,
The whirling reel, the steady-levelled gun ;—
With all attractions for the youthful sense,
All charms to please the manly mind, but one,

For, thou, for them, alas ! nor History hast
Nor even Tradition ; and the Man aspires
To link his present with his Country's past,
And live anew in knowledge of his sires ;

No rootless colonist of alien earth,
 Proud but of patient lungs and pliant limb,
 A stranger in the land that gave him birth,
 The land a stranger to itself and him.

Yet, though in History's page thou may'st not claim
 High places set apart for deeds sublime
 That hinge the turnings of the gates of Fame
 And give to view the avenues of Time ;

Not all inglorious in thy elder day
 Art thou, Moy-Liffey ; and the loving mind
 Might round thy borders many a gracious lay
 And many a tale not unheroic find.*

Sir Almeric's deeds might fire a youthful heart
 To brave contention mid illustrious peers ;
 Tears into eyes as beautiful might start
 At tender record of Isolda's tears ;

Virtue herself uplift a loftier head,
 Linked through the years with Ormond's constancy,
 And airs from Runnymede around us spread,—
 Yea, all the fragrance of the Charter Tree

Wafted down time, refresh the conscious soul
 With Freedom's balms, when, firm in patriot zeal,
 Dublin's De Londres, to Pandolfo's scroll
 Alone of all refused to set his seal ;

Or when her other Henry's happier eyes
 Up-glancing from his field of victory won,

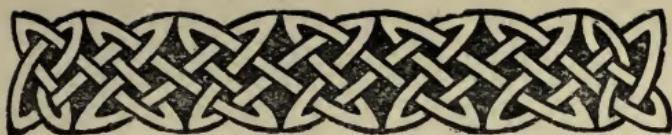
eheld, one moment, 'neath adoring skies,
The lifted isle lie nearer to the sun.—

For others, these. I, from the twilight waste
Where pale Tradition sits by Memory's grave,
Gather this wreath, and, ere the nightfall, haste
To fling my votive garland on thy wave.

Wave, waft it softly : and when lovers stray
At summer eve by stream and dimpling pool,
Gather thy murmurs into voice and say,
With liquid utterance passionate and full,

Scorn not, sweet maiden, scorn not, vigorous youth,
The lay, though breathing of an Irish home,
That tells of woman-love and warrior-ruth
And old expectancy of Christ to come.





DEIRDRE.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

[The *Aidedh* or Tragical Fate of the Sons of Usnach, in the various forms in which it has been handed down to us, is one of the best-known of all the old Irish bardic stories. Besides prose translations, by O'Flanagan of the Iberno-Celtic Society, and by O'Curry in the *Atlantis*, it has furnished MacPherson with the theme of his *Darthula*; and has recently been made the subject of a fine romantic poem, also entitled *Deirdre*, by Dr. Robert Joyce. Therefore, it is hardly necessary to premise that this piece, though grounded on the same original, does not affect to be, in any sense, a reproduction of it. It might, without impropriety, be called a Monodrame, because, though the actors are more than one, the action is unbroken, and the principal figures remain in sight throughout, moving in a progressive scene, which extends from Glen Etive in the Western Highlands of Scotland to the House of the Red Branch at Emania, the old residence of the provincial kings of Ulster. The remains of Emania still exist near Armagh (*Lays of the Western Gael*, p. 235). The name only of the Red Branch survives in the adjoining townland of Creeveroe; but local tradition points out some earthworks there as the site of the King's Stables. The *Aidedh* of Clan-Usnach is one of the cyclic tales leading up to the great epic of the *Tain-bo-Cuailgne*, which, in order of time, should come between it and "Conary."]

DEIRDRE.

ACTORS.

NAISI SON OF USNACH, a Refugee from the Court of Conor,
King of Ulster.

AINLÉ } ARDAN } Brothers of Naisi, in exile with him.

FERGUS MAC ROY, Ex-King of Ulster.

BUINO BORB } ILLAN FINN } Sons of Fergus.

BARACH, a Brother of the Red Branch.

CORMAC, Son of Conor.

PURSUivant.

DEIRDRE, Wife of Naisi.

LÉVARCAM, her Nurse.

TIME—First century. SCENE—Glen Etive in Scotland to
Emania in Ulster.

SCENE OPENS AT GLEN ETIVE, IN SCOTLAND.

Deirdre, Naisi.



DEIRDRE.

HOU'R'T sad.

NAISI.

Not sad.

DEIRDRE.

Say not thou art not sad,
Else I, more sad, shall say thou lovest me not.

NAISI.

I love thee, Deirdre ; ever : only thee.

DEIRDRE.

Whence, then, that naughty knitting of the brow
And turning of the eye away from mine ?

NAISI.

Not wholly sadness ; but I own at times
My mind is fretted with impatience
Of longer exile in these Alban wilds.

DEIRDRE.

And, wretched me ! I am the cause of it.

NAISI.

Think not I would reproach thee. Were't to do
Again, again I'd do it ; and defy
Conor's worst malice. Justly he may rage
Losing his destined jewel, which to wear,
I glory ; though but few its splendour see.

DEIRDRE.

Enough for me the wearer. Were the world
Peopled by but us two, I were content.

NAISI.

Not so with me. Love makes the woman's life
Within-doors and without ; but, out of doors,
Action and glory make the life of man.
Here I have room for neither : here there's room
Only for solitudes interminable,

For desert vastness and vacuity.
I see yon wave that never felt a keel
Since first it rose, break white along the beach
So far beneath my feet, I hear it not.
The winds that whistle by me through the grass
Bring never sound of life but 'tis a beast
Or bird that sends it; save, perchance, at times
My brothers' or my house-knave's hunting-cry
May stir the silence to a moment's life.
I am impatient to consort again
With men, my equals: once again to speak
My thoughts in council, or in public court,
Swaying the judgments of attending throngs,
And charming minds to unanimity
With manly, warm-persuasive argument;
Or in the front ranks of embattled hosts
To interchange the cast of flying spears,
'Mong bloody Mars's high competitors,
With poets to record us standing by.
Nay, at the fair, the games, the feasting board,
To look on friendly faces and to grasp
The trusted hands of other men, were joy
Worth even daring the worst; and back again
Taking my customed place on Eman Green,
Though there he sat, and all his hosts were there.

DEIRDRE.

Alas, infatuate, who would shelter me
When thou, fast bound, shouldst see me dragged away
To death it might be, or to worse than death?

NAISI.

Renowned Cuchullin never would sit by
 And see thee wronged. Were Conall Carnach there,
 Or his own step sire, Fergus son of Roy,
 No man should do my Deirdre injury.

DEIRDRE.

Cuchullin do I trust, and Conall too ;
 But Fergus gave his kingdom for a toy.

NAISI.

For love of Nessa laid he kingship down.
 A lovelier Nessa, for the love of me,
 Spurned the same crown when it was offered her.

DEIRDRE.

Nessa now dead, he haunts the drinking-hall,
 More than is seemly in a nobleman,

NAISI.

Hall or hill-side, would we were with him now !

DEIRDRE.

Here we are safe ; keep to our shelter here.
 Here we have both been blest, and yet may be,
 Forgetting Conor, and beyond his reach.

NAISI.

My loving, loyal brothers, too ; they left

Home, pleasure, and renown, to follow me
 In this elopement. I must think of them.
 Are they to waste their bloom of manly youth
 Here in this desert, without hope to wife ?

DEIRDRE.

They ask but to partake their brother's lot ;
 Happy if he be happy. Me indeed
 They love as a true sister. Never yet
 Have I beheld on either gentle face
 Gloom or reproachful look ; though, were it there
 'Twere not for me to wonder or complain ;
 For I, alas ! am she that tempted you
 To that rash, rapturous, defiant deed
 That wraps us all in bonds of banishment.
 No, never have they shown themselves to me
 Other than sweet, affectionate, and gay.

NAISI.

Thou would'st not have them lose their joy of life
 To keep us happy ?

DEIRDRE.

Happy in thy love,
 I can but think of that estate alone.
 Love is all-selfish. Love, but thinks of one.
 Its own fulfilment is love's world to love.
 But here comes gentle Ainle from the chase.

NAISI.

Good brother, welcome : what is next afoot?

AINLE.

We hunt to-morrow in the corrie, sir.

NAISI.

Ay, I have hunted in the corrie oft,
 And there seen buck and doe, but never a man.
 And when I've slain my quarry, I have said,
 "Beast, thou wast happy as compared with me,
 "For thou wast of a good town citizen,
 "And mingledst antlers bravely with thy peers."

AINLE.*

What ails our brother ?

DEIRDRE.

"Tis a fond regret,
 Bred of the solitary life we lead.

AINLE.

Not solitary. I were well content,
 In such good company as still we have,
 To spend my days a-hunting ; and at eve
 Sing to the harp, or listen to old tales
 Of love, and lover's perils, hopes and joys ;
 While Ardan and Lord Naisi seated by,
 Beguiled the swift time in their chess-play-wars.

DEIRDRE.

Lo, Ardan comes in haste. He wears the look
 Of one who presently has news to tell.

No news were now good news. I pray the Gods
We're not found out !

ARDAN.

A sail, I've seen a sail.
Unless the sea-fog cheats my sight, a sail.

DEIRDRE.

A flight of sea-birds, haply ; not a sail.

NAISI.

Nay, wherefore, not a sail ? Were't Conor himself
And all his ships, I'd hail the face of man.
Let's forth and see it, whatsoe'er it be.

AINLE.

Hark, heard ye not a cry ?

DEIRDRE.

No. Keep within,
'Tis the fox barking, haply ; not a cry.

ARDAN.

'Tis a man's cry ; a hunter's hallo, hark !

NAISI.

I know the call ; an Ulster man is he
Who gives it. If my old and glorious friend
Fergus, the son of Roy, yet walks the earth,
It is his hunting-call. Ho, Fergus, ho !

DEIRDRE.

Vain my contention. Here, alas, he comes.

FERGUS.

Found in good hour. Hail, sons of Usnach, hail

NAISI.

Comest thou, Fergus, enemy or friend?

FERGUS.

Friend as of old ; to well loved friends I come,
And welcome may the message be I bring.

NAISI.

From whom and what the message? Sends he peace?

FERGUS.

Conor sends peace and pardon. I myself
Your warrantor and convoy.

NAISI.

Favouring Gods!

What spell has wrought him to forgive my wrong?

DEIRDRE.

We did him not a wrong. The wrong was his.
He kept me as a dainty for his use,
Locked in a prison-garden shamefully ;
Beast, who might well have been my grandfather!

Till Naisi gave me freedom, and I gave
Naisi the love was only mine to give.

FERGUS.

What, daughter: thou shalt come as well as he,
And have him for thyself, be it wrong or right.
'Tis fixed and warranted; and here's the hand
Will make it good. Naisi, the case stood thus:
My politic, learned step-son found his Maev
A partner somewhat over-arrogant,
And broke the marriage. Maev, imperial jade,
Has wed with Ailill, Tinne's son, and reigns
With him o'er the Connacians: in his halls
Of battlemented Croghan nursing hate
'Gainst now-detested Conor; and from wilds
Of Irrus drawing Gamanradian braves
And fierce Damnonian sworders, sends them forth
'Gainst the Ultonian borders, host on host,
Pressing the Red Branch with perpetual war.
We've fought them, and we've chased them oft, but
- still
They issue from their heathy western hives
As thick as summer midges, and our swords
Are dulled with slaughter, and our arms are tired.
We've missed thee, Naisi, and thy brothers here;
There's the plain truth. We missed and needed you.
And we,—Cuchullin, Conall, and myself,—
Avowed it in full council. And, said I,
“Sir, give me liberty to carry them
“Thy royal message with assurance firm,

“ Of pardon and safe-conduct both for her
 “ And him, and them, and all their company,
 “ And, ere this present rounding moon come full,
 “ I’ll fetch the troop of truants back again.”
 “ Ah, ha,” said he, “ thou knowest then where they
 hide?”
 “ Well do I know,” I answered, “ but not tell,
 “ Till first in open court thou’st said me yea.”

NAISI.

What said he then to that?

FERGUS.

He sat awhile,
 Revolving in his mind I know not what,
 And something whispered Barach sitting by.
 “ Say yea,” said Conall. Said Cuchullin, “ king
 “ Say yea, and we will be their sureties.”
 “ Yea then,” said Conor, and the thing was done ;
 And here am I ; and there my galley rides
 Will land us safely this same afternoon
 At Bon-a-Margy, upon Irish ground.

NAISI.

Oh noble Fergus, let me kiss thy hand !

AINLE.

Our dear befriendier and deliverer !

ARDAN.

In whose safe-conduct we do all confide.

FERGUS.

What say'st thou, daughter Deirdre, shall we go?

DEIRDRE.

Ah me, among you all, what voice have I?
 Ye leap like fishes to the baited hook,
 And like young salmons will be drawn to land.
 I knew 'twas Fergus ere I saw his face,
 And knew he came a messenger of ill ;
 For I am daughter of a seér sire,
 And prescience of disaster came on me
 With first announcement of his sail on shore.

NAISI.

Say not disaster ; Fergus brings a boon ;
 Even when, unpardoned, I'd have risked return,
 Our pardon, on condition of return.

DEIRDRE.

Ay, by a time is now impossible,
 Under the very wording of the boon.
 The moon, then rounding, rises full to-night :
 How then return before the moon be full ?

NAISI.

'Tis our return, and placing of ourselves
 At Conor's orders, not the hour precise
 Of our return, that will entitle us
 To that which he has promised in return.

ARDAN.

And, say that time were of the bargain part,
 Enough if by to-night we reach his realm,
 Returning, so, in jurisdiction.

AINLE.

Lord Fergus here stands as in Conor's place,
 And here we yield us freely to his will
 To stay or to return as he commands.

DEIRDRE.

After to-night his function's at an end,
 And he no longer Conor's deputy.

FERGUS.

Why, Deirdre, thou'rt chief justice of the court !
 Had I but had thee by me on the bench,
 I ne'er had ceased to rule for lack of law.
 But lay these puzzling niceties aside,
 You journey back on my protection
 And warrant of safe-conduct, all of you.

DEIRDRE.

What warrant did false Conor ever allow
 To stand between him and his own desires ?
 Thou deem'dst his sureties good when in thy place
 Thou sett'st him for a year, and thought he'd yield
 The loaned dominion when the time was out.
 Thou hadst the sighs of Nessa and his oath

For surety then ; but when the day was come
To yield thee back the sceptre, robe, and crown,
He king'd it still ; and rates thee, ever since,
His valiant subject and good stepfather.

NAISI.

Injurious Deirdre, thou art beautiful,
But hast a bitter and unguarded tongue.
Fergus allowed young Conor to retain
The sovereignty he lent him, not because
Conor demanded, but himself so will'd.
For who would fill a royal judgment-seat
Must study close the law's intricacies,
And leave delights untasted, Fergus loves
Better than balancing litigious scales,
And hearing false oaths bear the jargon out
Of wrangling pleaders. Nature him has framed
For love, for friendship, and for poesy ;
Nor rules there king in Erin, not himself,
Th' arch-king of Tara, Conary, glorious son
Of Ederscal, would venture, or have power,
To violate safe-conduct given by him.

FERGUS.

Daughter, thou art the wife of my good friend ;
I therefore hear not any word ill-timed,
If such were spoken. But beseech you, come
The tide now serves us, and the wind sits fair
Array ye quick, and let us seek the shore.

NAISI.

Bring forth my chess-board and its furniture,
My battle-tackle, and my hunting-gear,
For glad I am, and full resolved to go.

DEIRDRE.

Call me nurse Levarcam, and bring my harp.
Sirs, I am ready. Yes, I knew thy cry,
Fergus, for, I remember, once you rode
To hunt with Nessa close beneath my bower :
And I could tell you still what robes ye wore,
And what the several names ye called your hounds.
'Twas then I heard it, and I know it still,
But feigned I knew it not ; and to no end.
Yes, from that turret on my garden wall
I oft have viewed the Brethren of the Branch,
And learned their cries of combat and of chase ;
And there I oft saw him my eyes preferred,
As my heart prizes still above all men.
And where he goes, I go along with him.

FERGUS.

See here our galley. Send us forth a plank.
Hold by my hand. Deirdre, I swear to you,
My heart is lighter now you are on board ;
For a good ending shall our journey have,
And I am sure thou'l thank me for it yet.
Cast off ! Up sail ! She feels the wind. We fly.

NAISI.

The hills race past us. See, we leave the lake
And breast the sea. There Jura bares her paps
Amid her cloudy sucklings, nurse of storms.
We steer betwixt her and the mainland here,
For outside lies the whirlpool in whose gulf
Brecan of old and all his ships went down.
Dance, sparkling billows, as my spirits dance !
Mine now were perfect joy were thou but gay.

DEIRDRE.

Give me my harp, and let me sing a song ;
And, nurse, undo the fastenings of my hair ;
For I would mingle tresses with the wind
From Etive side, where happy days were mine.

I.

Harp, take my bosom's burthen on thy string,
And, turning it to sad, sweet melody,
Waste and disperse it on the careless air.

II.

Air, take the harp-string's burthen on thy breast,
And, softly thrilling soulward through the sense,
Bring my love's heart again in tune with mine.

III.

Bless'd were the hours when, heart in tune with heart,
My love and I desired no happier home
Than Etive's airy glades and lonely shore.

IV.

Alba, farewell ! Farewell, fair Etive bank
 Sun kiss thee ; moon caress thee ; dewy stars
 Refresh thee long, dear scene of quiet days !

FERGUS.

'Tis loved companionship makes nature fair ;
 And scenes as fair as Etive wait thee yet.
 Thou soon shalt have that company thou wouldest,
 And choice of Ulad to enjoy it in :
 For, see, the capes of Erin heave in sight,
 Fair Foreland yonder on his eastern watch,
 And there Dunseverick. Lo, the warning fire
 That gives the signal we are seen from shore.

NAISI.

What concourse this that waits us on the beach ?

FERGUS.

Methinks 'tis Barach's ensign I discern,
 Our well-loved, valiant Brother of the Branch.
 Yea, it is he : and yonder, by my life,
 Two not unworthy, hopeful candidates
 For brotherly admittance, my own sons,
 Dark Buino Borb, and Illan Finn the Fair.

BARACH.

Welcome to Fergus. Push the plank to shore.
 Descend, fair daughter. Sons of Usnach, hail !

FERGUS.

My noble brother Barach ! Nay, great sir,
'Tis not for thee to be our cup-bearer.

BARACH.

To better use could none commend the cup,
Nor goblet offer from a riper cask.

FERGUS.

Wine, this, the king of the world might drink and die.

BARACH.

Drink, and long live. And, noble Naisi, thou
Drink too,

NAISI.

This cup to health and thanks : no more.

BARACH.

What, Fergus, thou must sup with me to-night ?

FERGUS.

I pray thee, Barach, hold me as excused.
We journey hastily, as thou may'st see.
Fetch forth the chariots. Have the posts been warned ?

BUINO.

Relays are ready, and the inns prepared.

FERGUS.

Mount, daughter Deirdre. Fill the cup again,
And fair farewells and healths to all of you.

BARACH.

Fergus, thou wilt not pass a brother's door ?
We wait thee at Dunseverick. Let thy wards
Take the protection of thy own good sons.
They'll see them safe. To that end Buino Borb
Is this same morning from Emania come,
And here finds Illan by a lucky chance
Journeying thither with his company.
Thy honor shall not suffer in their hands.

DEIRDRE.

Fergus, thou'rt pledged to us. Say nay to him.

BARACH.

He shall not say me nay. My board is spread ;
The choicest Brethren of the Branch are there,
And much would marvel should his place be void.
His sons are well-sufficient in his room.
What though ye journeyed to the Branch alone,
None dare molest you, such a sheltering shield
Is the pledged word of Fergus ; and they know,
From post to post, 'tis on his guarantee
And pass-word that ye travel ; since the king
On his assurances has pardoned you.

DEIRDRE.

Fergus, I put thee under bond and vow,
Pledged but to-day, that thou desert us not.

BARACH.

Fergus, I put thee under bond and vow,
Pledged when we made thee Brother of the Branch,
Thou pass not further till thou sup with me.

FERGUS.

I pray thee, Barach, to forbear thy suit.

BARACH.

No : neither will I that forbear, nor bear
This public scorn that Deirdre puts on me.

FERGUS.

Naisi, what answer wouldst thou I should make ?
I cannot halve myself : but these, my sons,
Are part of me and will not shame the rest.
They cannot fill my place at Barach's board,
But, at your side for convoy, well they can.

NAISI.

Where vow conflicts with vow, first-vow'd prevails,
Therefore, though Barach's be a churlish choice,
Made against woman and way-faring men,
I judge him best entitled. Sup with him.
Buino, I have not known thee until now,

But deem thy father's son must needs be true,
 Courteous, and valiant. Illan I have known
 Since childhood, and in saying that, say all
 That commendation vouches in a man.
 What then, young nobles, are ye ready, say,
 To be our convoy in your father's room,
 From hence to Eman gate, and thenceforward
 Till Fergus do rejoin us ?

BUINO AND ILLAN.

Ready, sir.

NAISI.

I ask no oaths. I read in eyes of both
 Bright honor's pledge ; and so commit myself
 My wife, my brethren, and my serving train
 Into your keeping. Mount, and let us ride.

FERGUS.

Sons, play the part of men, and show me well
 In your presentment of me at the court,
 Thou, Buino, have my spear : and, Illan, thou
 Take this good sword of mine. There spreads no
 shield.

Before the breast of champion of the Branch
 But it will pierce it ; Conor's own except :
 For it was forged by smiths of fairyland,
 And all the voices of the floods and seas
 When loudest raised, are welded in its rim.

But in this errand that I send you on
No need will either have of sword or spear.

NAISI.

Mount, Deirdre. Sons of Fergus, ride beside ;
Set forward cheerly : son of Roy, adieu !

DEIRDRE.

'Tis hard to fancy fraud behind an eye
So open blue. Ride near me, Illan Finn ;
And, as our chariot glides along the mead,
Tell me the mountains and the streams we pass,
The lakes, the woods, and mansions by the way.
What hills be these around us ?

ILLAN.

That, Knocklayd
To rightward, girded with his chalky belt ;
Lurgeden yonder, smoothly-back'd to us,
But browed like frowning giant toward the sea ;
And now to leftward, haunted by the fays,
Glenariff's birchen bowers and clear cascade.

DEIRDRE.

And in the distance, glittering to the west ?

ILLAN.

Our silver river, that ; the humming Bann.

DEIRDRE.

Why humming ?

ILLAN.

'Tis a pretty country tale—
 How one who played the pipes to please his love,
 Was by a jealous water-sprite drawn in :
 And, when the river buzzes through his reeds,
 They say 'tis he that still would pipe to her,
 But that the fairy has his chanter hid,
 And left him but the drone. An idle tale.

DEIRDRE.

Nay, nought is idle that records true love.
 From Neagh's lake, methinks, that river runs ?

ILLAN.

Yea truly.

DEIRDRE.

And they tell another tale
 How that was once dry champaign, do they not ?

ILLAN.

Yes ; 'twas young Liban's task to watch the well,
 And duly close its covering-lid at eve,
 Lest something evil there inhabiting
 Should issue forth : but, on an afternoon,
 Walking with her true lover, with a mind
 That thought of nothing evil, she forgot

Well and well-lid ; and so the under-sea
 Burst through and drowned the valley : but the Gods,
 Who favour constant lovers, spared their lives ;
 And there, beneath a glassy dome they dwell,
 Still pleased in one another's company.
 The lake lies yonder : we shall see it soon.

DEIRDRE.

Mark how the simple country people deck
 Each natural scene with graceful tales of love,
 While the strong castles and the towns of men
 Are by the poets and historians
 Stuck full of tragedies and woes of war.

ILLAN.

Those are but tales to pass away the time,
 Invented by the fancies of poor swains
 And rustic maidens : but the chroniclers,
 Who note the deeds done in the haunts of men,
 Have oft but wicked actions to record.

DEIRDRE.

And therefore thou ?—

ILLAN.

Would rather if I might,
 Frequent the open country, and converse
 With shepherds, hunters, and such innocents.

DEIRDRE.

Yet wouldest thou not shun martial deeds of arms ?

ILLAN.

I dare not shun them, did they challenge me,
 For that were base, unmanly cowardice ;
 But I would rather win the smiles I love
 By mild humanity and gentleness.

DEIRDRE.

Thou lovest, then ?

ILLAN.

A peerless maid I love
 And, for her sake, methinks, love all the world ;
 For all the world's perfections are in her.

DEIRDRE.

Long be thou happy in believing so ;
 Have me in kind regard as I have thee,
 And pryythee let thy brother take thy place.
 Dark though he be, as thou art flaxen fair
 I trust I may esteem him equally.
 Ride near me Buino : let me talk with thee :
 Say, wherefore, do men call thee Buino Borb ?

BUINO.

A something haughty that they find in me,
 —Or, as I fancy, fancy that they find,—

Not unbeseeming in the eldest born
 Of him who once wore crown of all we see,
 Led some at first to call me by that name,
 Which now, by oft repeating, clings to me.

DEIRDRE.

Conor's young Cormac and thyself, methinks,
 Are of an age, and, haply, by and by,
 For that same crown may be competitors.

BUINO.

Small were my fear, were there but I and he.

DEIRDRE.

Why hold him, prythee, in that light esteem?

BUINO.

Because, too nice, and over-scrupulous,
 He weighs his actions in a tedious scale,
 Nor strikes when favouring fortune gives the ball.

DEIRDRE.

And thou?—

BUINO.

I've won already from his sire
 Promise half-ratified of rents and lands,
 Will make me higher in estate than he.
 'Twas not by letting fair occasion slip
 I won that promise, let me promise thee.

DEIRDRE.

How called, the promised principality?

BUINO.

Dalwhinny 'twill be, when the land is mine.

DEIRDRE.

But, ere the gift's complete, behoves thee snatch
Some fresh occasion to commend thyself?

BUINO.

Which doubtless yet will come.

DEIRDRE.

Turn here thy eyes,

And tell me, Buino, of thy courtesy.
What do they under yonder aged tree,
Itself a grove, a leafy temple-court?

BUINO.

That is renowned Crevilly's sacred ash,
And they beneath it are its worshippers.
Small the return their worship's like to bring,
Made to dead wood and early-dropping leaves.

DEIRDRE.

Thou deemest, then, there is no God in it?

BUINO.

No more than in the fountain or the carn,

The pillar-circle or the standing stone,
Where other worshippers perform their rounds.

DEIRDRE.

Nor in the sun, or wind, or elements?

BUINO.

No more.

DEIRDRE.

But thou believest in the Gods
Who, whether present under forms of things
Perceptible to sense, or whether lodged
Apart in secret chambers of the air,
Take notice of the impious acts of men
As murders, treasons, lovers' broken vows?

BUINO.

Sunshine and dew fall equal on the fields
Of this man and of that: the thunderbolt
Strikes, indiscriminating, good and bad.

DEIRDRE.

How, then, oblige men to the oaths they swear?

BUINO.

Each nation has its proper swearing-Gods,
Whom invoking, if one speak the lie,
Being found out, he's punishable here.

DEIRDRE.

But there?

BUINO.

I know not : I was never there,
 Nor ever yet met anyone who was.
 But all these things may be as thou hast said.
 I know not : but allow it possible.

DEIRDRE.

Oh ! yonder see the lake in prospect fair,
 It lies beneath us like a polished shield.
 Ah, me ! methinks, I could imagine it
 Cast down by some despairing deity,
 Flying before the unbelief of men.
 There, in the vale below, a river clear
 Runs by a mounded mansion steep and strong.
 Know'st thou the name and story of the place?

BUINO.

'Tis called Rathmore, and nothing more know I.
 Illan belike has got some old romance,
 Passing with poets for its history.

DEIRDRE.

Illan, what king was he dwelt here of yore ?

ILLAN.

Fergus, the son of Leidé Lithe-o'-limb,
 Ere yet he reigned at Eman, did dwell here.

DEIRDRE.

What, Fergus Wry-mouth? I have heard of him,
And how he came by his ill-favoured name,
And struck his bond-maid, and should pay for it.
'Tis a fair valley. And 'twas here he lived?
Methinks I see him when he rose again
From combat with the monster, and his face,
That had that blemish till love wiped it off,
Serene and ample-featured like a king.

ILLAN.

Not love, but anger, made him fight the beast.

DEIRDRE.

No, no, I will not have it anger. Love
Prompts every deed heroic. 'Tis the fault
Of him who did compose the tale at first,
Not to have shown 'twas love unblemish'd him.
And so 'tis here we cross Ollarva's fords,
And, with our wheels still dripping, skirt the lake?
No longer shows it like the ample shield
I pictured it, when gazing from above.
'Tis now a burnished falchion half-unsheathed
From cover of the woods and velvet lawns.
Oh! happy fancy, what a friend art thou,
That, with thy unsubstantial imagery,
Effacest solidest and hardest things,
And mak'st the anxious and o'er-burthened mind
Move, for a while forgetful of itself,

Amid its thick surrounding obstacles,
 As easy as a maiden young and gay
 Moves through the joyous mazes of the dance !
 Thanks, gracious Illan, for thy fair discourse
 That has beguiled the way so happily,
 Till now, when almost nearing to the goal.
 Buino, thou'rt from Emania newly come :
 Say shall we find renowned Conall there ?

BUINO.

A messenger from Leinster late arrived
 Reports Athairne, primate of the bards,
 Maltreated of Mesgedra, King of Naas ;
 And Conall has departed to his aid.

DEIRDRE.

And where Cuchullin ?

BUINO.

At Dundealga he,
 Repressing tumult of his borderers there.

DEIRDRE.

How lies Emania ; and Dundealga how ?

BUINO.

Straight on, Dundealga : Eman to the right.

DEIRDRE.

My lord, I counsel that we journey on
 Straight to Cuchullin's mansion.

BUINO.

Surely no.

Our charge is to conduct you to the king.

DEIRDRE.

We are not prisoners, Buino, in thy hands.
Naisi, beseech thee, let's not trust ourselves
At court of Conor, till our friends be there.

BUINO.

Your friends are here : faith-worthy friends as they.

NAISI.

Let's on to Eman : 'twere a heinous slight
Put on these frank and brave young noblemen
To doubt their will and full ability
For our protection, were protection claimed.
But none will call in question or impugn
The word of Fergus for our safety pledged.
Thy fears are groundless.

DEIRDRE.

Fergus is not here :
Fergus has found occasion not to be
Where our occasions do most call for him :
Fergus consorts with whispering Barach now :
He shifts us on his proxies, young and raw ;
And thou hast heard on what support we lean,
Trusting the faithless faith of one of them.

NAISI.

Thou wrong'st him, Deirdre.

BUINO.

Yea, she does me wrong.
But not for that will I be false to you.

DEIRDRE.

Yea, not for that wilt thou be false to us.

ILLAN.

We both will spend our lives to see you safe.

DEIRDRE.

Thou wouldest. I well believe it ; but for him
To whom the Gods are possibilities,
May-be's, perchances, I've no trust in him.

NAISI.

Deirdre, forbear. Buino, good cause hast thou
For thy displeasure ; but it rests with me
To order our proceeding, not with her.

DEIRDRE.

Oh rash, insensate, weakly-credulous,
That thinkest all men honest as thyself !

NAISI.

One must be master ; and that one am I ;
And I must judge this case for all of you.

Man lives by mutual trust. The commonwealth
Falls into chaos if man trust not man.
For then all joint endeavours come to nought,
And each pursues his separate intent,
Backed by no other labour than his own.
Which confidence, which bond of social life,
Is bred in some of just experience,
Of oaths and terror of the Gods in some,
But, in the most, of natural honesty
That God has planted in the breast of man,
Thereby distinguishing him from the beasts.
And where I find it, ground it as it may,
In use, religion, or mere manliness,
There do I love, revere, and cherish it.
And since these courteous, brave young gentlemen
Have taken it on their honor and their truth
To hold us harmless, though we near the gates
Of one who bears me great and just ill-will,
I'll trust them wholly ; nor affront their faith
With any scrupulous, unhandsome show
Of base suspicion, diffidence, or fear.
Drive on to Eman, therefore. Rightward drive.
It is my will, and I will have it so.



DEIRDRE.

Nurse Levarcam, rememberest thou the time
We sat together on that hill we see
There where the sky-line has a streak of gray,
And snow was on the ground ?

LEVARCAM.

Aye, well indeed
 Do I remember, darling ; it was there
 Thou sawest him first, and said the sifted snow
 Was hardly fairer.

DEIRDRE.

He has frowned on me
 Thrice, now, who never frowned on me before.
 Yet am I prouder to be ruled by him,
 And, for that noble justice of his mind,
 Do love him better, were that possible
 Where love was always best, than e'er before.

LEVARCAM.

My pet, my precious one, we know not yet
 But that the king may treat us honestly.
 If to the Red Branch lodging we be sent,
 Mistrust him : but, elsewhere, set face to face,
 And other champions of the province by,
 He durst not venture such a villany
 As thy dark-omening spirit shudders at.
 But, see, we near the town. The sun sets red,
 And turns the low-hung awning of the clouds
 Into a lowering, crimson canopy.

DEIRDRE.

Blood-red it hangs. I know the augury.
 But knowledge and forewarning now come late.

NAISI.

We near the palace. See, a steward comes
 To lead us to our lodging. Sir, precede :
 We follow. 'Tis the Red Branch, as I see,
 We are assigned to. Often in this hall
 Have I been merry, and will be again.
 Here's supper laid. Beseech you sit ye down
 And let's refresh ourselves.

DEIRDRE.

I cannot eat.

NAISI.

Nor I, in truth. I have been somewhat chafed
 Give me some wine ; and set the chess-tables.
 Ardan will play with me, to pass the time,
 Till haply Conor send us his commands.
 And, Ainle, thou be umpire of the game.

AINLE.

Before we sit, sir, shall we set the watch ?

NAISI.

No. We are here in charge of trusted friends,
 And what is needful to be done they'll do.

DEIRDRE.

Nurse, while in this defiant confidence
 He sits, disdaining fortune, steal thou forth,

And, mingling with the concourse in the hall,
Observe what Conor does : and fetch me word.

NAISI.

Who's he who at the window there peeps in ?
Begone, base fellow, whosoe'er thou art !
I love not such espial. Play again.
Deirdre, set forth thy harp ; and let the air
Be brave and cheerful. We have nought to fear.

DEIRDRE.

I play my best ; though that be ill enough.
My heart is heavy at my fingers' ends.

NAISI.

How ! What ! Our spying overseer again !
Take that, thou villain, for thy impudence !

DEIRDRE.

What has disturbed my lord ?

NAISI.

A spying knave
At yonder window, that, with brutal eyes,
Surveyed us as we sat, and took thee in
As he'd appraise thy beauties, charm by charm.
None here shall pry into our privacy.
Lords, think it not in your disparagement,
But I would crave to have that casement closed,
And, if it please you, let my battle-arms

Be placed beside me, ready to my hand.
There, Deirdre, see, thy nurse would speak with thee.

LEVARCAM.

My sweet, my darling, I am here again,
He means us ill. I've seen and spoke with him.
He sat at table with his judges by,
And made this question with them, whether we
Not rendering ourselves before the full o' the moon,
His promise made to Fergus Roysen, held?
The judges differed. Half of them affirmed
His promise was, in that, conditional,
And, the condition failing, it held not.
The other half as stiffly did maintain
The point of time was nothing to the point,
And that, though Fergus might be late a day,
The pardon granted us did yet hold good.
With these young Cormac, sitting by, agreed,
And, to confirm his argument, did swear
That, saving still the duty of a son
Defending father, were his sire assailed,
He never would raise weapon 'gainst poor guests
Drawn in to jeopardy of life and limb
By plotted covin and duplicity.
Whereat—what I had never seen before—
Conor, who, ever, was as temperate
As his brave step-sire jovial, swallowed down
Two mighty cups of wine ; and, spying me,
He called me up, and, there before them all,
Demanded many things concerning thee,

And did thy beauty live upon thee still ?
“ No,” said I ; “ she is wrinkled, lean, and old,
“ And nothing like the Deirdre that she was ”
—The Gods forgive me for the loving lie !—
But while I spoke, one entering cried, “ ’Tis false !
“ There lives not beauty on the earth’s expanse
“ Fit to compare with her’s. I saw her sit,”
The insolent eaves-dropper did go on,
“ A perfect goddess, lovely to behold,
“ Upon a silken couch : she flung her arms,
“ No ivory fairer, o’er her golden harp,
“ And played a merry and delightful air
“ So sweet, I stood as in an ecstacy ;
“ When that strong traitor who consorts with her,
“ Spying me, snatched a chessman from the board
“ And flung it full at me : see here the wound.”
With that he showed his cheek besmeared with blood,
—I would the just Gods it had been his brains.—
And Conor, rising, cried to fetch his arms,
And vowed he would avenge his messenger ;
Then some cried “ treason ” ; others that denied.
And Cormac called out, “ Never better hap
“ Befall a cranny-haunting, mousing spy ! ”
Whereat I judged it well to come away,
And there I left them wrangling noisily.

DEIRDRE.

It is a crafty pretext for a quarrel ;
That quarrel to be pretext for his death,
And my deliverance into hands abhorred.

BUINO.

Who here?

PURSUIVANT.

A messenger from Conor, I

BUINO.

His will?

PURSUIVANT.

He wills that thou deliver up
Naisi the son of Usnach, who stands charged
With wounding to effusion of the blood.

BUINO.

Under safe conduct is lord Naisi here,
And we, as sons and lawful deputies
Of his great surety, Fergus son of Roy,
Are answerable for him.

PURSUIVANT.

Yield him up

BUINO.

We will not yield him. There I plant the spear
Of Fergus. Pass it, and I strike thee dead.

PURSUIVANT.

Buino, a message for thy private ear.

BUINO.

Deliver it without. I follow thee.

DEIRDRE.

It is the confirmation of the grant
That bribes him to betray us.

ILLAN.

Oh, no, no !
If that were possible, I'd die of shame.

NAISI.

Await him : he'll return.

DEIRDRE.

Oh trustful breast,
Incapable of comprehending guile,
As is the goblet of true crystal stone
To hold the poisoned draught that shivers it,
Would I could bear thy heart-break, now at hand !

AINLE.

He comes not back. Sir, shall we take our arms ?

NAISI.

What, Illan, wouldst thou that we deem ourselves
Discharged the duty to rely on thee ?

ILLAN.

Not while I live, and these, my father's men,
Are here to make the pledge of Fergus good.

NAISI.

The move is with thee, Ardan. Play again
Lord Buino will come back to us anon.

DEIRDRE.

Dalwhinny's lord, he never will come back.

NAISI.

I hear one coming.

DEIRDRE.

Oh my heart ! not he.

PURSUIVANT.

In the king's name, yield ye my prisoner up,
Or Conor's self will fetch him. He's at hand.

ILLAN.

We will not yield him up, to thee or him.

PURSUIVANT.

Thy brother Buino spoke as brave as thou,
And he has done his homage gratefully,
And now is lord of lands and seigniories.

NAISI.

We're not betrayed ?

ILLAN.

Oh Naisi, what a word !
Thou soon shalt see I am not worthy it.

PURSUIVANT.

Illan, I bear a message for thee too.

ILLAN.

Out with it.

PURSUIVANT.

Let me have thy private ear.

ILLAN.

What, tampering villain, wouldest thou bribe me too ?
Up, comrades ; thrust the fellow from the door.
They shall not live who offer Illan shame.

PURSUIVANT.

Assistance, ho, without !

DEIRDRE.

They force the door.

ILLAN.

We'll meet and drive them to their barracks back.
Throw the door open ! Charge upon the knaves !

LEVARCAM.

Oh ye good heavens, what a man is here
We counted but an hour ago a boy !
He darts upon them fiercer than a hawk
Striking at pigeons. With a swifter whirl
Than arms of windmills and than grinding wheels

He makes the red rout through and over them.
 Hah ! from his strokes they tumble and rebound
 As shocks that jump upon the threshing floor,
 There's Fergus's true blood ! The other one
 Is none of his : there Fergus was played false.
 Oh, well done, Illan ! Glorious youth, well done !

DEIRDRE.

'Twas tender of dishonor set aflame
 His soul's unconscious reservoirs of wrath
 That, blazing forth, do so transfigure him,
 And of the soft-affection'd, gentle youth
 Make the heroic, formidable man.
 He fires the very moonlight with his blade,
 Flash upon flash.

LEVARCAM.

Oh, hark the dreadful clang

DEIRDRE.

He fights with Conor, It is Conor's shield
 Screams, clamours, and resounds beneath his blows.
 Speed him, kind Gods ! Ah me, who strikes between ?

LEVARCAM.

'Tis Cormac to his father's rescue come.
 Alack, young Illan cannot combat both.
 He falls : he's slain : his broken band return.

DEIRDRE.

Leaderless remnant of brave friends, come in.

NAISI.

Now, noble brothers, we may arm ourselves,
Nor wound protecting pride. Make fast the doors,
Give me my corselet.

DEIRDRE.

Let me brace it on.

The helmet, Levarcam.

LEVARCAM.

We'll dress our lord

Most like a royal champion,

DEIRDRE.

Like a god

We'll send him forth to trample all things base.

NAISI.

Oh dear-loved Deirdre, thy advice was good.
I had been wiser, had I taken it,
And all of us, I dread, had safer been.
Yet thou dost not reproach me.

DEIRDRE.

No reproach

From lips of Deirdre shalt thou ever hear.
All that my noble lord has done was right,
Wise, and magnanimous.

NAISI.

I did my best,

Though that but ill, for honor.

DEIRDRE.

I, my best,
 Though that but weak and petulant, for love :
 And now for love will do whate'er remains.

NAISI.

Ardan, learn for us what they do without.

ARDAN.

They've summoned fresh battalions. Till these come
 They siege us at a distance.

NAISI.

Then, we strike
 Before their aids come up. Thou'rt ready, dear,
 To share this venture ?

DEIRDRE.

Ready, if near thee.

NAISI.

Ardan and Ainle, to your tender care
 I give my Deirdre. Fence her, right and left,
 With cover of your bodies and your shields.
 I take the front. Our cohort will make head
 For the King's Stables. There at least we'll find
 A shelter we may better hope to hold
 Till Fergus's return ; or, happily,
 Conveyance, and the chance of full escape.

DEIRDRE

Stay, Levarcam. They will not harm thee. Stay.

LEVARCAM.

Alack, I'm hurt, and stay against my will.

NAISI.

Friends, keep together. Deirdre, thou shalt see
 What love can do, if honor were unwise.
 Cast wide the portal. Be the Gods our aid !

LEVARCAM.

I cannot see their onset. I but hear
 The hurrying and the clashing. Oh, ye Gods,
 Shield ye my darling one, or send her death
 Rather than life with loathing and despair !
 I saw her, ere she left, prepare a cup ;
 What, and for what, I guess indeed too well.
 Would I could give it her, were that to do :
 'Twere my last service, and would be my best.
 How dreadful 'tis to hear men dealing death,
 And not to know who falls and who keeps up
 The tumult slackens. We are saved or lost.
 One side returns victorious. Deirdre comes :
 But ah, her sidesmen are not those they were !
 'Tis Cormac leads her ; these are Conor's men
 That bear the burthens in. Oh, heavy sight
 Ardan and Ainle and lord Naisi dead !

DEIRDRE.

Ye need not hold me. I am wholly calm.
Thanks, gentle Cormac, who hast won for me
The boon to see these nobles buried.
Give them an honorable sepulture ;
And, while ye dig their grave, let me begin
My lamentable death-song over them.

I.

O, sons of Usnach, stretched before me, dead,
Ye were, in life, Ulidia's chosen three
For every gift and grace of manly Nature,
For wisdom, valour, courtesy, and song.

II.

Naisi, my husband, O my slaughtered lord,
O pierced by cruel swords that pierced not me,
Thou Honor's Sanctuary, thou Tower of Justice,
By sacrilegious treason beaten down !—

III.

Thou wast the one, with counsel of a sage,
That kept Ulidia happy-homed in peace,
The one, with onsets of a kingly lion,
That left Ulidia glory-crowned in war.

IV.

Thou wast the one, with prudent-generous sway,
That kept thy household and thy festive hall,—
The one, with mildness and with manly patience,
That kept thy wilful helpmate, ordered well.

V.

Ainle and Ardan, brothers of my heart,
 O shapely as young salmons, where ye lie,
 Melodious voices, breaths of youthful ardour
 In life's high chorus, cold and silent now!—

VI.

Ye were the two, with fleetness of your feet,
 That took the bounding creatures of the plain,—
 The two, with sweetness of your soft addresses,
 That took the daughters of the land, in thrall.

VII.

The wolf may now, and now the forest boar,
 Roam free : the hunters from the hill are gone :
 Invasion proudly now may leap the border
 The sons of Usnach stand to guard no more.

VIII.

Smiles, rest ye now beneath dejected cheeks,
 Sink, maiden blushes, back on burthened hearts ;
 Delight and dalliance in the dust are lying,
 Before the clay-piled margin of the grave.

IX.

Oh, greedy grave-dug earth, that swallowest
 The strength and loveliness of all that lives,
 Thou shalt not always hide from hopes immortal
 The coldly-hoarded treasures of thy clay !

X.

A day shall come, the May-day of Mankind,
 When, through thy quickening clods and teeming pores,
 The sunward-mounting, vernal effluences
 Shall rise of buried Loves and Joys re-born.

XI..

Dig the grave deep, that, undisturbed till then,
 They rest, past reach of mortal hate and fear ;
 Past the knave's malice and the tyrant's anger,
 And past the knowledge of what rests for me.

XII.

Dig the grave deep. Cast in their arms of war,
 Cast in the collars of their hounds of chase,
 To deck their chamber of expectant slumber,
 And make the mansion wide enough for four.

CORMAC.

Deirdre, 'tis time that I conduct thee hence.

DEIRDRE.

Sir, I am, sudden, faint. That cup of wine
 Is still untasted. Pray thee hand it me.
 I would but kiss my nurse and say farewell.
 Now give me this refreshment.

LEVARCAM.

She'll not thirst
 More in this world ; now well past reach of harm.

CORMAC.

Ay ; so. 'Twas poisoned. She has freed herself.
 Oh, wretched king, who now canst only hear.
 That all for nothing thou hast been forsworn
 Fair corpse, I'll have thee by thy husband laid.
 Thou art her nurse, and thou shalt see to it.

LEVARCAM.

Sir, I have heard a shout which I know well.
 'Tis Fergus who approaches. Stay not here.

CORMAC.

To save a father vile and fraudulent
 I've slain the noblest youth in all the world.
 For him I fight no more. I fear to face
 The grief of guileless Fergus whom I love,
 More even than his wrath. I'll get me hence,
 And, in the west, will seek a guardsman's pay
 With Maev and Ailill, till this storm be passed.

FERGUS.

Where are my wards, my wards that I have bailed ?
 Where are my sons who had my wards in charge ?
 Their danger was revealed me ere I sat,
 And hot upon their track I'm here, to find
 Confusion, horror, blood, and treachery.
 Where are my wards, the wards of Fergus, where ?

LEVARCAM.

Too blind with passion to perceive them lie

Here almost at his feet : he hurries past.
Unhappy Fergus, what atrocious pangs
Of rage and self-reproach will sting thee through
When presently thou shalt have learned it all !
Ay, big with bitter knowledge, back he comes.

FERGUS.

Fire, bring me fire ! bring ropes and grapple-hooks !
I'll pull his proud aspiring palace-roof
Down to the ground and burn it over him.
I'll take such vengeance on this traitor king
All Erin, shore to shore, shall ring with it,
And poets in the ages yet to come
Make tales of wonder of it for the world.





DEIRDRE'S FAREWELL TO ALBA.

(FROM THE IRISH.)



AREWELL to fair Alba, high house of
the Sun,
Farewell to the mountain, the cliff,
and the Dun ;
Dun Sweeny adieu ! for my Love
cannot stay,
And tarry I may not when love cries away

Glen Vashan ! Glen Vashan ! where roebucks run free,
Where my Love used to feast on the red deer with me,
Where rock'd on thy waters while stormy winds blew,
My Love used to slumber, Glen Vashan, adieu !

Glendaro ! Glendaro ! where birchen boughs weep
Honey dew at high noon o'er the nightingale's sleep,
Where my Love used to lead me to hear the cuckoo,
'Mong the high hazel bushes, Glendaro, adieu !

Glen Urchy ! Glen Urchy ! where loudly and long
My Love used to wake up the woods with his song,
While the Son of the Rock* from the depths of his
dell
Laugh'd sweetly in answer, Glen Urchy, farewell !

Glen Etive ! Glen Etive ! where dappled does roam,
Where I leave the green sheeling I first call'd a home ;
Where with me and my true Love delighted to dwell,
The Sun made his mansion, Glen Etive, farewell !

Farewell to Inch Draynach, adieu to the roar
Of the blue billow bursting in light on the shore ;
Dun Fiagh, farewell ! for my Love cannot stay,
And tarry I may not when love cries away.

* Mac an Alla, *i.e.*, Echo.





DEIRDRE'S LAMENT FOR THE SONS OF USNACH.

(FROM THE IRISH.)



HE lions of the hill are gone,
And I am left alone—alone—
Dig the grave both wide and
deep,
For I am sick, and fain would
sleep!

The falcons of the wood are flown,
And I am left alone—alone—
Dig the grave both deep and wide,
And let us slumber side by side.

The dragons of the rock are sleeping,
Sleep that wakes not for our weeping :
Dig the grave and make it ready ;
Lay me on my true Love's body.

Lay their spears and bucklers bright
By the warriors' sides aright ;

Many a day the Three before me
On their linkèd bucklers bore me.

Lay upon the low grave floor,
'Neath each head, the blue claymore ;
Many a time the noble Three
Redden'd those blue blades for me.

Lay the collars, as is meet,
Of their greyhounds at their feet ;
Many a time for me have they
Brought the tall red deer to bay.

Oh ! to hear my true Love singing,
Sweet as sound of trumpets ringing :
Like the sway of ocean swelling
Roll'd his deep voice round our dwelling.

Oh ! to hear the echoes pealing
Round our green and fairy sheeling,
When the Three, with soaring chorus,
Pass'd the silent skylark o'er us.

Echo now, sleep, morn and even—
Lark alone enchant the heaven !—
Ardan's lips are scant of breath,
Neesa's tongue is cold in death.

Stag, exult on glen and mountain—
Salmon, leap from loch to fountain—
Heron, in the free air warm ye—
Usnach's Sons no more will harm ye !

Erin's stay no more you are,
Rulers of the ridge of war ;
Never more 'twill be your fate
To keep the beam of battle straight.

Woe is me ! by fraud and wrong,
Traitors false and tyrants strong,
Fell Clan Usnach, bought and sold,
For Barach's feast and Conor's gold !

Woe to Eman, roof and wall !—
Woe to Red Branch, hearth and hall ! -
Tenfold woe and black dishonour
To the false and foul Clan Conor !

Dig the grave both wide and deep
Sick I am, and fain would sleep !
Dig the grave and make it ready,
Lay me on my true Love's body.





CONARY.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

[The old Irish Bardic tale of the Destruction of the House (*bruidin*) of Da-Derga—for my first acquaintance with which I am indebted to Mr. W. M. Hennessy—furnishes the ground-work of this piece ; but it will not be understood that “Conary” pretends to be a full reproduction of the *Togail bruidin da dergae*, or that all its incidents are drawn from that source.

The *Bruidin* is generally regarded as having been a kind of Caravanserai ; and there seem good grounds for accepting the idea of the late ingenious Mr. Crowe that it represents, in the west of Europe, the *Prytaneum* or house of state-hospitality of the ancient Greeks. There appear to have been six principal places of this kind in Ireland at the commencement of the Christian era ; and one of these, called Bruidin-Da-Derga, is said to have been the scene of the death of King Conary Mor, whose reign is made to synchronise with the close of the Pagan period, under the circumstances related in the tale.

The old story affords a curious insight into the beliefs—or what were regarded by the author or authors of the *Togail* as having been the beliefs—of the ethnic Irish. We read of God, and of Gods, but not of altars or sacrifices ; and of certain sacred injunctions called *Gesa* (*gaysha*), the violation of which was attended with temporal punishment. The agents in inflicting such retribution appear in the form of fairies, men, that is, of the *sidhs** or fairy-hills, those mounts in which the wizards and sorcerers of the Tuatha de Danaan were thought to enjoy an under-ground existence and to preserve the arts of music and metallurgy. These *gaysha*—seemingly very similar to the *taboo* of modern ethnic populations, and to those prohibitions which

* *Fear-sidhe*, pronounced *Feearee*=fairy; *ban-sidhe* (i.e., the woman of the *sidh*), pronounced *banshee*.

were called *religiosa* by the ancient Romans—were of an arbitrary and trivial kind. Those enjoined on the monarch and on the provincial kings continued to be solemnly registered down to the completion of the Book of Rights, but under the sanction of the names of Patrick and Benignus.

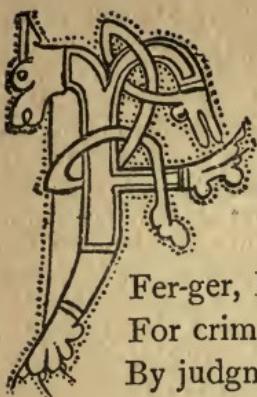
The classical reader will find in the *Togail* a curious—probably an unexpected—illustration of the old eastern method of computing the losses in a military expedition. There, the forces, before departing on their campaign, cast each man an arrow into a common receptacle ; for which, on their return, each man withdrew an arrow ; and the weapons remaining represented the dead and missing. (*Procop. de bell. Pers. l. i., c. ii.*) The actors in the *Togail* cast, every man, a stone into a common heap, or carn, and what remained after each survivor had withdrawn his stone, served as the census and memorial of the slain.

The singular and terrible properties ascribed to the Spear of Keltar in the *Togail* may not be without some bearing on Homer's expression *μαλάγων ἐν παλάμυσι* in reference to the Spear of Diomede.

The *Togail* also contributes its evidence to the great antiquity of the leading lines of highway. There were five of these "Streets" radiating from Tara, the two mentioned in the tale together corresponding pretty nearly with the old post-road from Dublin to the north. The author of the *Togail* places the site of Bruidin-Da-Derga on the River Dodder, in the ancient territory of Cualann, near Dublin, where *Bohernabreena*, or "Road of the Bruidin," still preserves the name. The fact of a sea-invasion corresponding in its main features with the descent of the pirates on the coasts of Meath and Dublin, is chronicled in the Book of Howth, and still lives very vividly in local oral tradition about Balrothery and Balbriggan.

The theatre appears to have been unknown among the early Irish ; but no one can peruse the bardic tales without being struck by the dramatic form of their construction. In the *Togail*, as in many other examples, where one actor describes and another interprets, we are reminded of the scene of Helen on the wall ; and the dialogue often carries on the action independently of narrative. We must, however, in the originals of all ancient Irish story, be prepared for one peculiarity of these pieces designed for recitation before mixed audiences of high and low, in a common hall. The infantine mind delights in wonder ; and exaggeration was one of the chief agencies employed by the bards to excite that kind of pleasure among the children of Nature whom they addressed.]

CONARY.



ULL peace was Erin's under Conary,
Till—though his brethren by the
tender tie
Of fosterage—Don Dessa's lawless
sons,

Fer-ger, Fer-gel, and vengeful Fergobar,
For crimes that justly had demanded death,
By judgment mild he sent in banishment ;
Yet wrung his own fraternal heart the while,
Whose brothers, Ferragon and Lomna Druth,
Drawn by affection's ties, and thinking scorn
To stay behind while others led the way
To brave adventure, in their exile joined.

Banished the land of Erin, on the sea
They roamed, and, roaming, with the pirate-hordes
Of British Ingcel leagued ; and this their pact :
The spoil of Britain's and of Alba's coasts
To fall to them ; and Erin's counter-spoil
To fall to Ingcel. Britain's borders first
They ravaged ; and in one pernicious raid
Of sack and slaughter indiscriminate,
Ingcel's own father and his brethren seven
By chance sojourning with the victims, slew,
Then, Alba sack'd, said Ingcel, “ Steer we now
“ For Erin, and the promised counter-spoil.”

“ ‘Tis just ; and welcome to our souls as well

"For outrage unavenged," said Fergobar.
 " 'Tis just : it is thy right," said Ferragon.
 "'Tis just, and woe it is !" said Lomna Druth.

'Twas then that Conary from strife composed
 By kingly counsel, 'twixt contending lords
 Of distant Thomond, held his journey home.
 But, when in sight of Tara, lo, the sky
 On every side reflected rising flame
 And gleam of arms. "What this ?" cried Conary.

A certain Druid was there in the train
 Who answered, "Often did I warn thee, King,
 "This journey at this season was ill-timed,
 "As made in violation of the *gaysh*
 "That King of Tara shall not judge a cause
 "Except in Tara's proper judgment hall
 "From Beltane-day to May-day."

"Yea, in truth,
 "I do remember now," said Conary,
 "Amongst my prohibitions that is one,
 "Which thoughtlessly I've broken. Strange it is
 "That act for speedy justice and for peace
 "Accomplished, should, with God, be disesteem'd.
 "But, since Religion's awful voice forbids,
 "I pray forgiveness of offended Heaven,
 "Whose anger at my fault too plain I see,
 "And vow atonement at thy own award.
 "But, which way now ?"

"Ride northward to the track

" Where Street Midluachra and Street Cualann join ;
" There, choice of highway waits us, north or south."
 Northward they rode. " What be these moving
 brakes
" Before us ? Nay, 'tis but a running drove
" Of antler'd stags. Whence come they? and whence
 come
" These darkening flights of fowl above our heads ?"
 " These the wild brood of Clane-Milcarna's dens :"
Replied the druid. " It is another *gaysh*
" For Tara's King to see them leave their lairs
" After mid-day ; and ill will come of it."
 " Omens of evil gather round my path,
" Though thought of evil in my breast is none,"
Said Conary, and heaved a heavy sigh ;
" Yet, since I reign by law, and holy men
" Charged with the keeping of the law, declare
" Thou shalt not so-and-so, at such a time
" Do or leave undone, it beseems not me
" To question for what end the law is so :
" Though, were it but a human ordinance,
" Twere, haply, counted childish : but, go to,
" I own another violated *gaysh* ;
" I pray forgiveness of offended Heaven ;
" And, since some fierce invading enemy—
" Misguided brothers, that it be not you !—
" Bars our approach to Tara, let us choose
" Cualann highroad ; for Cualann-ward there dwells
" One whom I once befriended ; and I know
" His home will give me shelter for to-night,

“ Knew I aright the way that leads to it.”

“ Name of the man, oh King ? ” demanded Cecht
 (Fly ye, foes all, fly ye before the face
 Of Cecht, the battle-sidesman of the King !)
 The biggest man yet gentlest-countenanced
 Of all that rode in Conary’s company.
 “ Da-Derga he,” said Conary.

“ Ride on,”

Said Cecht. “ Street Cualann whereon now we are
 “ Leads straight to Bru’n-Da-Derga, and leads straight
 “ Through and beyond it. ’Tis a house of rest
 “ For all that come and go ; where ready still
 “ The traveller finds the wind-dried fuel stack’d .
 “ The cauldron slung, and ale-vat on the floor.
 “ A strong, fast mansion. Seven good doors it has,
 “ And seven good benches betwixt door and door
 “ And seven good couches spread ’twixt bench and
 bench.
 “ All that attend thee now, and all that come—
 “ See where they come along Midluachra track,
 “ The host of Emain, in good time I judge,
 “ Journeying south—shall nothing want for room.
 “ I shall go forward : for my duty it is
 “ To enter first at nightfall, when my king
 “ Comes to his lodging ; and with flint and steel
 “ Kindle the fire whose flame shall guide him home.”

Then forth, at gallop of his steeds, went Cecht ;
 While, slower following, Conary was aware
 Of three that rode before them on the way.
 Red were their coursers and their mantles red,

Red, too, their caps, blood-red—

“ Another *gaysh*,”

Said Conary. “ I also call to mind

“ Amid my prohibitions this is one,

“ To follow three red riders on the way ;

“ Injunction idle, were it not divine.

“ After them, Ferflath ; stay them till we pass.”

Then the light lad young Ferflath, Conary’s son
 Sprang forth at gallop on the red men’s track,
 And called his message shrilly from behind,
 But failed to overtake them. He who rode
 Last of the triad sang him back a lay—

“ Water, oh youth, oh slight swift-riding youth,

“ On back, on neck, on shoulder lightly borne.

“ Water will quench ; fire burn ; and shocks of hair

“ At horrid tidings, upon warriors’ heads

“ Bristle as reeds in water ; water ; ho ! ”

Ferflath returned, and told to Conary
 The lay the red man sang ; “ and sir,” he said,
 “ I rode, I think, as seemly as himself,
 “ And know not what he meant : but sure I am
 “ These are not men of mankind, as we are,
 “ But fairy men and ministers of ill.”

“ Now then,” said Conary, “ let every *gaysh*
 “ That dread Religion with hard-knotting hand
 “ Binds on the King of Tara, for to-day
 “ Be broken ! Let them go. They may precede ;
 “ May tie their red steeds at the great hall door,
 “ And choose their seats within ; and I, the King,
 “ May follow, and accept the traveller’s place

" Last to attain the inn. Well, be it so :
 " Respect departs with fortune's one-day change.
 " But, friends, despond not, you. Though few we be
 " In midst of these marauders (oh, my heart
 " Forbid the rising thought that these be they !),
 " Yet shall we soon be many ; for they come,
 " They whom on Street Midluachra late we saw,
 " Now following on Street Cualann. In good time
 " They join us ; for, be sure such chariot-throng
 " Leaves not the borders of the warlike North,
 " But champions good come with it. Let us in."

While thus fared Conary, the pirates' scouts
 Who watched the coast, put off to where the fleet,
 Stay'd on the heaving ridges of the main,
 Lay off Ben-Edar. Ingcel's galley reached,
 High on the prow they found him looking forth,
 As from a crag o'er-hanging grassy lands
 Where home-bred cattle graze, the lion glares
 A-hungered ; and, behind, as meaner beasts
 That wait the lion's onset for their share,
 Outlaw'd and reprobate of many a land,
 The ravening crew. Beside him, right and left,
 Stood Lomna, Ferragon, and Fergobar ;
 Which Lomna in the closure of his cloak
 Wore a gold brooch embossed with flashing gems
 Choicest by far of all their spoils yet won :
 And Ingcel thus demanded of the spies—

" What saw ye, say ? "

" A chariot-cavalcade

“ Along Street Cualann moving from the north.
“ Splendid the show of lofty-pacing steeds
“ And glittering war-cars : chariots seventeen
“ We counted. In the first were reverend men,
“ Poets, belike, or judges. After these
“ Heralds, it seem’d, or high apparitors
“ That give the world to know a great one comes.
“ He in the third car rode ; an aged man,
“ Full-grey, majestical, of face serene,
“ Followed by household numerous and strong,
“ Cooks, butlers, door-wards, cup-bearers, and grooms.
“ What heard ye ? ”

“ From a vast hall’s open doors
“ The stroke of steel on flint at kindling fire ;
“ And every stroke so sounded as the arm
“ That gave it were a giant’s, and every shower
“ Of sparks it shed—as if a summer sky
“ Lightened at eve—illumed the dusk around.”

“ What this, good Ferragon, who best of all
“ Knowest Erin hill and valley, things and men ? ”
Said Ingcel. Ferragon made answer slow,
(For, first, his soul said this within himself,
“ Oh, royal brother, that it be not thou ! ”)—

“ I know not what may be this open hall
“ With fire at hand unless, belike, it be
“ Da-Derga’s guest-house, which, for all who come
“ By Cualann Street, stands open, wherein still
“ Firewood stands stack’d and brazen cauldron hangs

" Slung ready, and clear water running through ;
" Bruidin-Da-Derga."

" And the man who strikes
" The flint and steel to kindle fire therein ? "

" I know not if it be not that he be
" Some king's fore-runner, sent before a king
" To kindle fire ere yet the king himself
" And royal household reach their resting-place."

" And he who in the thirdmost chariot rode,
" He who is grey, serene, majestical ? "
" I know not if it be not that he be
" Some king of Erin's sub-kings who, to-night,
" Rests in Da-Derga's hospitable hall."

" Up sail ! To shore !" cried Ingcel ; and the fleet,
As flight of wild-geese startled from a fen,
Displayed their wings of white, and made the land.

'Twas at Troy Furveen, and the sun was down ;
But, from Da-Derga's hall so streamed the light,
It shone at distance as a ruddy star ;
And thitherward the host o'er moor and fell
Marched straight : but when behind a sheltering knoll
Hard by, but still concealed, the ranks were drawn,
" Make now our Carn," said Ingcel, and the host
Defiling past him, cast, each man, his stone
All in one heap.

" When this night's work is done,'
Said Ingcel, " he who shall return alive
" Shall take his stone again. Who not returns,
" His stone shall here remain his monument.

“ And now, before we make the trial of who
“ Returns, and who stays yonder, let us send
“ Scout Milscoth—for he bears the boast of sight
“ And far-off hearing far above us all—
“ To spy the house and bring us speedy word
“ Of all he sees and hears, outside and in :
“ So shall we judge how best to win the same.”

Forth went the spy : they waited by their Carn,
Till, gliding as a shadow, he returned :
And round him, as he came, they drew a ring,
Round him and Ingcel and Don Dessa’s sons,
And round their destined stones of memory.

“ What sawest thou outward ? ”

“ Outward of the house

“ I saw, drawn up at every guarded door,
“ Full seventeen chariots ; and, between the spokes,
“ Spying, I saw, to rings of iron tied,
“ At end and side wall, thrice a hundred steeds
“ Groom’d sleek, ear-active, eating corn and hay.”

“ What means this concourse, think’st thou, Ferragon ? ”

“ I know not if it be not that a host
“ Resorting, it may be, to games or fair
“ At Tara or at Taltin, rest to-night
“ In the great guest-house. ’Twill be heavier cost
“ Of blows and blood to win it than it seem’d.”

“ A guest-house, whether many within or few,
“ Is as the travellers’ temple, and esteemed
“ In every civil land a sanctuary.

"'Twere woe to sack the inn," said Lomna Druth.

"Lomna," said Ingcel, "when we swore our oaths
We made not reservation of the inn :
"And, for their numbers, fear not, Ferragon ;
"The more, the more the spoil. Say on, and tell
"What heard'st thou ?"

"Through the open doors I heard
"A hum as of a crowd of feasting men.
"Princely the murmur, as when voices strong
"Of far-heard captains on the front of war
"Sink low and sweet in company of queens."

"What think'st thou, Ferragon ?"

"The gentlest speech
"Within doors gives the loudest cheer afield.
"Methinks to spoil this house will try our strength."
"And it shall try it : and our strength shall bear
"That and worse trial. Say, what sawest thou next
"Within the house ? Begin from the right hand."
"To rightward of the great door in the midst
"A bench I saw : ten warriors sat thereon.
"The captain of the ten was thus. His brow
"Thick and high arching o'er a gray clear eye :
"A face long-oval, broader-boned above :
"A man whose look bespoke adventure past
"And days of danger welcome yet to come,
"Though sadden'd somewhat, haply by remorse
"For blood ill-spilt or broken vows or both.
"His mantle green, his brooch and sword-hilt gold."
"What captain this, conceiv'st thou, Ferragon ?"

"I know him ; verily a man of might ;
 "A man of name renown'd in field and hall ;
 "Cormac Condlongas, long the banish'd son
 "Of Conor son of Nessa. When his sire
 "Through love of Deirdre broke his guarantees
 "Pledged to his step-sire, Fergus son of Roy,
 "For Usnach's sons' safe-conduct, Cormac, he,
 "Through love of Fergus and through stronger love
 "Of kingly-plighted honour undefiled,
 "Abjured his father's councils and his court,
 "And in the hostile halls of western Maeve
 "Spent many a year of heart-corroding care,
 "And many a man of Ulster, many a man
 "Of his own kin, in alien service, slew.
 "If he be there, methinks to-night's assault
 "Will leave the stones of some here unremoved."

Said Ingcel, "I shall know him, when I see
 "That pale remorseful visage by and by,
 "And that same brooch and sword-hilt shall be mine.
 "What of the nine ?"

"The nine he sat among
 "Were men of steadfast looks, that at his word,
 "So seemed it me, would stay not to enquire
 "Whose kindred were they he might bid them slay."

"Knowest thou, oh friend, the serviceable nine ?"

"I know them also," answered Ferragon.
 "Of them 'tis said they never slew a man
 "For evil deed, and never spared a man

“ For good deed ; but, as ordered, duteous, slew
 “ Or slew not. Shun that nine, unless your heads
 “ Be cased in casquets made of adamant ;
 “ Else shall the corpse of many a valiant man
 “ Now present, on Da-Derga’s threshold lie,”
 “ Nine for his nine ! ” said Ingcel. “ Think not
 thou
 “ By tongue-drawn dangers and deterrent phrase
 “ Exaggerate, to shake my settled soul
 “ From that which is my right. Say on : what next ? ”
 “ A bench of three : thick-hair’d, and equal-long
 “ The hair on poll and brow. Black cloaks they wore,
 “ Black their sword-sheaths, their hafted lances black ;
 “ Fair men, withal, themselves, and ruddy-brown.”
 “ Who these, oh Ferragon ? ”

“ I know not, I,
 “ Unless, it may be, these be of the Picts
 “ Exiled from Alba, who in Conor’s house
 “ Have shelter ; and, if these indeed be they,
 “ Three better out of Alba never came
 “ Or sturdier to withstand the brunt of blows.”
 “ Blows they shall have,” said Ingcel ; “ and their
 home,
 “ Rid of their presence well, shall not again
 “ Have need to doom them to a new exile.
 “ What further sawest thou ? ”
 “ On the bench beside
 “ I saw three slender, three face-shaven men,
 “ Robed in red mantles and with caps of red.
 “ No swords had they, nor bore they spear or shield,

“ But each man on his knee a bagpipe held
 “ With jewelled chanter flashing as he moved,
 “ And mouth-piece ready to supply the wind.”

“ What pipers these ? ”

“ These pipers of a truth
 “ If so it be that I mistake them not,
 “ Appear not often in men’s halls of glee :
 “ Men of the *Sidhs* they are ; and I have heard
 “ When strife fell out in Tara Luachra’s hall
 “ Around Cuchullin and the butchering bands
 “ Of treacherous Maeve and Ailill, they were there.”

“ To-night their pipes shall play us to our ships
 “ With strains of triumph ; or their fingers’ ends
 “ Shall never close the stops of music more,”

So Ingcel ; but again said Ferragon,

“ Men of the *Sidhs* they are : to strike at them
 “ Is striking at a shadow. If ’tis they,
 “ Shun this assault ; for I have also heard
 “ At the first tuning of these elvish pipes
 “ Nor crow nor cormorant round all the coasts
 “ But hastens to partake the flesh of men.”

“ Flesh ye shall have, of Ingcel’s enemies,
 “ All fowl that hither flap the wing to-night !
 “ And music too at table, as it seems.
 “ What further sawest thou ? ”

“ On a broader bench
 “ Three vast-proportioned warriors, by whose side
 “ The slender pipers showed as small as wrens.
 “ In their first greyness they ; grey-dark their robes,

" Grey-dark their swords enormous, of an edge
 " To slice the hair on water. He who sits
 " The midmost of the three, grasps with both hands
 " A spear of fifty rivets, and so sways
 " And swings the weapon as a man might think
 " The very thing had life, and struggled strong
 " To dash itself at breasts of enemies :
 " A cauldron at his feet, big as the vat
 " Of a king's kitchen ; in that vat a pool,
 " Hideous to look upon, of liquor black :
 " Therein he dips and cools the blade by times."

" Resolve us who be these three, Ferragon."

" Not hard to tell ; though hard, perchance, to hear
 " For those who listen, and who now must know
 " What foes their fortune dooms them cope withal,
 " If this assault be given while these be here.
 " These three are Sencha son of Olioll,
 " Called ' Half-the-battle ' by admiring men ;
 " Duftach, for fierceness named the Addercop ;
 " And Govnan son of Luignech ; and the spear
 " In hands of Duftach is the famous '*lann*'
 " Of Keltar son of Utechar, which erst
 " A wizard of the Tuath De Danaan brought
 " To battle at Moy Tury, and there lost :
 " Found after. And these motions of the spear,
 " And sudden sallies hard to be restrained,
 " Affect it, oft as blood of enemies
 " Is ripe for spilling ; and a cauldron then

“ Full of witch-brewage needs must be at hand,
“ To quench it, when the homicidal act
“ Is by its blade expected ; quench it not,
“ It blazes up, even in the holder’s hand,
“ And through the holder, and the door-planks through,
“ Flies forth to sate itself in massacre.

“ Ours is the massacre it now would make :
“ Our blood it maddens for : sirs, have a care
“ How ye assault where champions such as these
“ Armed with the *lann* of Keltar, wait within.”

“ I have a certain blade,” said Ingcel, “ here ;
“ Steel’d by Smith Wayland in a Lochlann cave
“ Whose temper has not failed me ; and I mean
“ To cut the foul head off this Addercop,
“ And snap his gadding spear across my knee.
“ Go on, and say what more thou sawest within.”

“ A single warrior on a separate bench
“ I saw. Methinks no man was ever born
“ So stately-built, so perfect of his limbs,
“ So hero-like as he. Fair-haired he is
“ And yellow-bearded, with an eye of blue.
“ He sits apart and wears a wistful look,
“ As if he missed some friend’s companionship.

Then Ferragon, not waiting question, cried,
“ Gods ! all the foremost, all the valiantest
“ Of Erin’s champions, gathered in one place
“ For our destruction, are assembled here !
“ That man is Conall Carnach ; and the friend
“ He looks for vainly with a wistful eye
“ Is great Cuchullin : he no more shall share

" The upper bench with Conall ; since the tomb
 " Holds him, by hand of Conall well avenged.
 " The foremost this, the mightiest champion this
 " Left of the Red Branch, since Cuchullin's fall.
 " Look you, as thick as fragments are of ice
 " When one night's frost is crackled underfoot,
 " As thick as autumn leaves, as blades of grass,
 " Shall the lopp'd members and the cloven half-heads
 " Of them that hear me, be, by break of day,
 " Before Da-Derga's doors, if this assault
 " Be given, while Conall Carnach waits within ! "

" Pity to slay that man," said Lomna Druth.
 " That is the man who, matched at fords of Clane,
 " With maimed Mesgedra, though no third was near,
 " Tied up his own right hand, to fight him fair.
 " A man both mild and valiant, frank and wise,
 " A friend of men of music and of song,
 " Loved of all woman : were there only one
 " Such hero in the house, for that one's sake
 " Forego this slaughter ! "

" Lomna," Ingcel said,

" Not without reason do men call thee fool ;
 " And, Ferragon, think not that fear of man
 " The bravest ever born on Irish soil
 " Shall make its shameful entrance in the breast
 " Of one of all who hear us. Spy, say on,
 " What further sawest thou ? "

" Three brave youths I saw ;
 " Three brothers, as I judge. Their mantles wide
 " Were all of Syrian silk ; and needle-work

"Of gold on every hem. With ivory combs

"They smoothed the shining ridges of their hair

"That spread and rippled to their shoulder tips,

"And moved with every motion of their brows.

"A slender, tender boy beside them slept,

"His head in one attendant's lap, his feet

"In lap of other one ; and, couched beside,

"A hound I saw, and heard him 'Ossar' called."

"Whose be these Syrian silks shall soon be mine,

"Oh Ferragon ? and wherefore weep'st thou, say ? "

"Alas, too well I know them ; and I weep

"To think that where they are, he must be near

"Their father, Conary, himself, the king :

"And woe it is that he whose infant lips

"Suck'd the same breast as ours, should now be there!"

"What, Conary, the arch-king of the realm

"Of Erin here ? Say, sawest thou there a king ? "

"I know not if a king ; but one I saw

"Seated apart : before his couch there hung

"A silver broidered curtain ; gre yhe was,

"Of aspect mild, benevolent, composed.

"A cloak he wore of colour like the haze

"Of a May morning when the sun shines warm

"On dewy meads and fresh-ploughed tillage land,

"Variously beautiful, with border broad

"Of golden woof that glittered to his knee

"A stream of light. Before him on the floor

"A juggler played his feats : nine balls he had,

"And flung them upward, eight in air at once,

"And one in hand : like swarm of summer bees

"They danced and circled, till his eye met mine ;
"Then he could catch no more ; but down they fell
"And rolled upon the floor. 'An evil eye
" 'Has seen me,' said the juggler ; and the child
"Who slept beside, awoke, and cried aloud,
" 'Ossar ! good dog, hie forth and chase the thieves !'
"Then judged I longer to remain were ill,
"But, ere I left, discharged a rapid glance
"Around the house, beholding many a band
"Of able guardsmen corsleted and helm'd,
"Of captains, carriers, farriers, charioteers,
"Horseboys and laqueys, all in order set,
"All good men of their hands, and weapon'd well."

Said Ferragon, "If my advice were given,
"Twould be to leave this onset unessay'd."

"Pity to slay this king," said Lomna Druth :
"Since he has reigned there has not fallen a year
"Of dearth, or plague, or murrain on the land :
"The dew has never left the blade of grass
"One day of Conary's time, before the noon ;
"Nor harsh wind ruffled hair upon the side
"Of grazing beast. Since he began his reign
"From mid-spring to mid-autumn cloud nor storm
"Has dimm'd the daily-shining, bounteous sun ;
"But each good year has seen its harvests three,
"Of blade, of ear, of fruit, apple and nut.
"Peace until now in all his realm has reigned,
"And terror of just laws kept men secure.

“ What though, by love constrained, in passion’s hour,
 “ I joined my fortunes to the desperate fates
 “ Of hapless kinsmen, I repent it now,
 “ And wish that rigorous law had had its course
 “ Sooner than this good king should now be slain.”

“ Not spoken like a brother,” Ingcel said,
 “ Nor one who feels for brothers by the side
 “ Of a grey father butchered, as I feel.”

“ Twas blind chance-medley, and we know them
 not,
 “ For kin of thine,” said Ferragon ; “ but he,
 “ This king, is kin of ours ; and that thou knowest
 “ With seasonable warning : it were woe
 “ To slay him.”

“ Woe it were, perchance, to thee ;
 “ To me, ’twere joy to slay both him and them ;
 “ ’Twere blood for blood, and what my soul desires.
 “ My father was a king : my brethren seven
 “ Were princely nurtured. Think’st thou I for them
 “ Feel not compassion ? nourish not desire
 “ Of vengeance ? No. I stand upon the oaths
 “ Ye swore me ; I demand my spoil for spoil,
 “ My blood for blood.”

“ ”Tis just,” said Fergobar,
 “ We promised and will make the bargain good.”

“ Yet take the spoil we own to be thy right
 “ Elsewhere,” said Ferragon ; “ not here nor now.

“ We gave thee licence, and we grant it still,
 “ To take a plunder : look around and choose
 “ What trading port, what dealers’ burgh ye will,
 “ We give it, and will help you to the gain.”

“ We gave thee licence,” Lomna said,—“ and I
 “ Grieve that we gave it, yea, or took the like,—
 “ To take a plunder ; but we gave thee not
 “ Licence to take the life, the soul itself
 “ Of our whole nation, as you now would do.
 “ For, slay our reverend sages of the law,
 “ Slay him who puts the law they teach in act ;
 “ Slay our sweet poets, and our sacred bards,
 “ Who keep the continuity of time
 “ By fame perpetual of renowned deeds ;
 “ Slay our experienced captains who prepare
 “ The youth for martial manhood, and the charge
 “ Of public freedom, as befits a state
 “ Self-governed, self-sufficing, self-contained ;
 “ Slay all that minister our loftier life,
 “ Now by this evil chance assembled here,
 “ You leave us but the carcass of a state,
 “ A rabble ripe to rot, and yield the land
 “ To foreign masters and perpetual shame.”

Said Ingcel, “ This night’s plunder is my own,
 “ And paid for. I shall take it here and now.
 “ I heed not Lomna’s airy rhetoric ;
 “ But this I say, and mark it, Ferragon :
 “ Let him who would turn craven, if he will,
 “ Take up his stone and go : and take withal

“Contempt of valiant men.”

Said Lomna Druth,
 “He is no craven, Ingcel; nor am I.
 “His heart misgives him, not because he fears
 “To match himself in manlyfeat of arms
 “With any champion, but because he fears
 “To do an impious act, as I too fear.”

“I own it true,” said Ferragon, “my heart
 “Is full of anguish and remorseful love
 “Towards him, my sovereign, who did never wrong,
 “Save in not meting justice to the full,
 “Against these violators of his law,
 “Who now repay his clemency with death.”

“Call it not clemency,” said Fergobar:
 “He drove us naked from ancestral homes
 “To herd with outlaws and with desperate men.”

“Outlaws we are; and so far desperate,”
 Said Ingcel, “that we mean to sack this house,
 “And for the very reason that he says,
 “Because the richest jewels, both of men
 “And gold, the land affords, are gathered there.”

Then Lomna from his mantle took the brooch,
 And said “Oh Ingcel, this and whatso else
 “Of other plunder fallen to my share
 “Lies in the ships, I offer. Take it all,
 “But leave this house unsack’d.”

Said Ferragon,
 "Take also all my share ; but spare the king."

But Ingcel roughly pushed the brooch away,
 And said "Have done. The onset shall be given."

"The onset shall be given, unless the earth
 "Open and swallow us !" said Fergobar.

"The onset shall be given, unless the heavens
 "Fall solid on us !" answered Ger and Gel.

"The onset shall be given !" replied they all.

Then Lomna,—laying his brooch upon the heap,—
 "Who first returns—but I shall not return—
 "To take his stone again, take also this ;
 "And, for the rest of what my sword has gained,
 "Share it among you, I forgive you all,
 "And bid you all farewell ; for nothing now
 "Remains for me but death :" and with the word
 He struck his dagger in his heart, and fell.

“Kings, lords, and men of war,” said Ferragon,
 “Comrades till now, the man whose body lies
 “Before us, though we used to call him fool
 “Because his heart was softer and his speech
 “More delicate than ours, I now esteem
 “Both wise and brave, and noble in his death.
 “He spoke me truly, for he knew my heart
 “Unspoken, when he said 'twas not through fear

" Of death I spoke dissuading ; but through fear
" Of conscience : but your hearts I better knew
" Leaving unspoken what was in my own ;
" For well indeed I knew how vain it were
" To talk of pity, love, or tenderness
" To bloody-minded and to desperate men.
" Therefore I told you, and I told you true
" What loss to reckon of your wretched lives,
" Entering this dragons' den ; but did not tell
" The horror and the anguish sharp as death
" In my own bosom entering as I knew
" The pictured presence of each faithful friend,
" And of that sire revered, ye now consign
" To massacre and bloody butchery.
" And that 'twas love that swayed me, and not fear,
" Take this for proof :" and drew and slew himself.
 " Comrades and valiant partners," Ingcel cried,
" Stand not to pause to wonder or lament
" These scrupulous companions ; rest them well !
" But set your spirits to achieve the end
" That brought us hither. Now that they are gone
" And nothing hinders, are we all agreed
" To give this onset bravely and at once ? "

" I speak for all," said Fergobar. " Agreed !
" Ready we are and willing, and I myself,
" Having my proper vows of vengeance,
" Will lead you, and be foremost of you all."

They raised the shout of onset : from his seat

Leaped Cecht, leaped Cormac, Conall Carnach leaped,
 And Duftach from the cauldron drew his spear ;
 But Conary with countenance serene
 Sat on unmoved. “ We are enough,” he said,
 “ To hold the house, though thrice our number came ;
 “ And little think they, whosoe’er they are,
 “ (Grant gracious ones of Heaven, it be not they !)
 “ That such a welcome waits them at the hands
 “ Of Erin’s choicest champions. Door-keepers,
 “ Stand to your posts, and strike who enters down ! ”

The shout came louder, and at every door
 At once all round the house, the shock began
 Of charging hosts and battery of blows ;
 And through the door that fronted Conary’s seat
 A man burst headlong, reeling, full of wounds,
 But dropped midway, smote by the club of Cecht.

“ What, thou ? oh Fergobar ! ” cried Conary ;
 “ Say, ere thou diest, that thou art alone—
 “ That Ferragon and Lomna whom I love
 “ Are not among you.”

“ King,” said Fergobar,
 “ I die without the vengeance that I vowed.
 “ Thou never lovedst me : but the love thou gavest
 “ My hapless brothers, well have they returned,
 “ And both lie outside, slain by their own hands
 “ Rather than join in this just cause with me.”

“ The gods between us judge,” said Conary.

“ Cast not his body forth. I loved him once,
 “ And burial he shall have, when, by and by,
 “ These comrades of his desperate attempt
 “ Are chased away.”

But swiftly answered Cecht,
 “ King, they bring fire without : and, see, the stream
 “ Runs dry before our feet, damm'd off above.”

“ Then, truly, lords,” said Conary, “ we may deign
 “ To put our swords to much unworthy use.
 “ Cormac Condlongas, take a troop with thee,
 “ And chase them from the house ; and, strangers, ye
 “ Who rode before me without licence asked;
 “ I see ye be musicians ; take your pipes
 “ And sound a royal pibroch, one of you,
 “ Before the chief.”

“ Yea, mighty king,” said one,
 “ The strain I play ye shall remember long,”
 And put the mouthpiece to his lips. At once—
 It seemed as earth and sky were sound alone,
 And every sound a maddening battle-call,
 So spread desire of fight through breast and brain,
 And every arm tofeat of combat strung.
 Forth went the sallying hosts : the hosts within
 Heard the enlarging tumult from their doors
 Roll outward ; and the clash and clamour heard
 Of falling foes before ; and, over it,
 The yelling pibroch ; but, anon, the din
 Grew distant and more distant ; and they heard
 Instead, at every door new onset loud,
 And cry of “ Fire ! ” “ Bring fire ! ”

“ Behoves us make
 “ A champion-circuit of the house at large,”
 Said Conary. “ Thou, Duftach, who, I see,
 “ Can’st hardly keep the weapon in thy hand
 “ From flying on these caitiffs of itself,
 “ Lead thou, and take two cohorts of the guard,
 “ And let another piper play you on.”

“ I fear them, these red pipers,” said the boy.
 “ Peace, little Ferflath, thou art but a child,”
 Said Duftach. “ Come, companions (—patience,
 spear!—)
 “ Blow up the pibroch ; warriors, follow me !”

And forth they went, and with them rushed amain
 Senchad and Govnan and the thick-hair’d three
 Of Picland with a shout ; and all who heard
 Deemed that the spear of Keltar shouted too
 The loudest and the fiercest of them all.
 So issued Duftach’s band : the hosts within
 Heard the commotion and the hurtling rout
 Half round the house, and heard the mingling scream
 Of pipes and death-cries far into the night ;
 But distant and more distant grew the din,
 And Duftach came not back : but thronging back
 Came the assailants, and at every door
 Joined simultaneous battle once again.
 Then Conall Carnach, who, at door and door,
 Swiftness as a shuttle from a weaver’s hand,
 Divided help, cried,

“ King, our friends are lost
 “ Unless another sally succour them !”

"Take then thy troop," said Conary ; "and thou
"Red-capp'd companion, see thou play a strain
"So loud our comrades straying in the dark
"May hear and join you."

"Evil pipes are theirs.

"Trust not these pipers. I am but a child,"
Said Ferflath ; "but I know they are not men
"Of mankind, and will pipe you all to harm."

"Peace, little prince," said Conall. "Trust in me :
"I shall but make one circuit of the house,
"And presently be with thee ; come, my men,
"Give me the *Brierin Conaill*, and my spear,
"And sound Cuchullin's onset for the breach."
And issuing, as a jet of smoke and flame
Bursts from a fresh-replenished furnace-mouth,
He and his cohort sallied : they within
Heard the concussion and the spreading shock
Through thick opposing legions overthrown,
As, under hatches, men on shipboard hear
The dashing and the tumbling waves without,
Half round the house ; no more : clamour and scream
Grew fainter in the distance ; and the hosts
Gazed on each other with misgiving eyes,
And reckoned who were left : alack, but few !

"Gods ! can it be," said Conary, "that my chiefs
"Desert me in this peril !"

"King," said Cecht,
"Escape who will, we here desert thee not."

"Oh, never will I think that Conall fled,"

Said Ferflath. "He is brave and kind and true,
" And promised me he would return again.
" It is these wicked sprites of fairy-land
" Who have beguiled the chiefs away from us."

" Alack," the Druid cried ; "he speaks the truth :
" He has the seer's insight which the gods
" Vouchsafe to eyes of childhood. We are lost ;
" And for thy fault, oh Conary, the gods
" Have given us over to the spirits who dwell
" Beneath the earth."

" Deserted I may be,
" Not yet disheartened, nor debased in soul,"
Said Conary. " My sons are with me still,
" And thou, my faithful sidesman, and you all
" Companions and partakers of my days
" Of glory, and of power munificent.
" I pray the Gods forgiveness if in aught,
" Weighty or trifling, I have done amiss ;
" But here I stand, and will defend my life,
" Let come against me power of earth or hell,
" All but the gods themselves the righteous ones,
" Whom I revere."

" My king," said Cecht, " the knaves
" Swarm thick as gnats at every door again,
" Behoves us make a circuit, for ourselves,
" Around the house ; for so our fortune stands
" That we have left us nothing else to choose
" But, out of doors, to beat them off, or burn
" Within doors ; for they fire the house anew."

Then uprose kingly Conary himself
And put his helmet on his sacred head,
And took his good sharp weapon in his hand,
And braced himself for battle long disused.
Uprose his three good sons, and doff'd their cloaks
Of Syrian purple, and assumed their arms
Courageously and princely, and uprose
Huge Cecht at left-hand of the king, and held
His buckler broad in front. From every side,
Thinn'd though they were, guardsman and charioteer,
Steward and butler, cupbearer and groom,
Thronged into martial file, and forth they went
Right valiantly and royally. The band
They left behind them, drawing freer breath,—
As sheltering shepherds in a cave who hear
The rattle and the crash of circling thunder,—
Heard the king's onset and his hearty cheer,
The tumult, and the sounding strokes of Cecht,
Three times go round the house, and every time
Through overthrow of falling enemies,
And all exulted in the kindling hope
Of victory and rescue, till again
The sallying host returned ; all hot they were ;
And Conary in the doorway entering last
Exclaimed, “A drink, a drink !” and cast himself
Panting upon his couch.

“ Ye cupbearers,”
Cried Cecht, “ be nimble : fetch the king a drink :
“ Well has he earned this thirst.” The cupbearers
Ran hither, thither ; every vat they tried.

And every vessel—timber, silver, gold,—
 But drink was nowhere found, nor wine nor ale
 Nor water. “All has gone to quench the fire.
 “There is not left of liquor in the house
 “One drop ; nor runs there water, since the stream
 “Was damm'd and turned aside by Ingcel's men,
 “Nearer than Tiprad-Casra ; and the way
 “Thither is long and rugged, and the foe
 “Swarms thick between.”

“Who now among you here
 “Will issue forth, and fetch your king a drink ?”
 Said Cecht. One answered,

“Wherefore not thyself ?”
 “My place is here,” said Cecht, “by my king's side :
 “His sidesman I.”

“Good papa Cecht, a drink,
 “A drink, or I am sped !” cried Conary.

“Nay then,” said Cecht, “it never shall be said
 “My royal master craved a drink in vain,
 “And water in a well, and life in me.
 “Swear ye to stand around him while ye live
 “And I with but this goblet in one hand,
 “And this good weapon in the other, will forth
 “And fetch him drink ;—alone, or say, with whom ?”

None answered but the little Ferflath ; he
 Cried, “Take me with thee, papa Cecht, take me !”
 Then Cecht took up the boy and set him high
 On his left shoulder with the golden cup
 Of Conary in his hand ; he raised his shield

High up for the protection of the child,
And, forth the great door, as a loosened rock
(Fly ye, foes all, fly ye before the face
Of Cecht, the battle-sidesman of the king !)
That from a hill side shoots into a brake,
Went through and through them with a hunter's bound ;
And with another, and another, reached
The outer rim of darkness, past their ken.
Then down he set the lad, and hand in hand,
They ran together till they reached the well
And filled the cup.

“ My little son, stay here,
Said Cecht, “ and I will carry, if I may,
“ His drink to Conary.”

“ Oh, papa Cecht,
“ Leave me not here,” said Ferflath ; “ I shall run
“ Beside thee, and shall follow in the lane,
“ Thou’lt make me through them.”

“ Come then,” answered Cecht,
“ Bear thou the cup, and see it spill not : come !”

But ere they ran a spear-throw, Ferflath cried
“ Ah me, I've stumbled, and the water's spilt.”

“ Alas,” said Cecht, “ re-fill, and let me bear.”

But ere they ran another spear-throw, Cecht
Cried, “ Woe is me ; this ground is all too rough
“ For hope that, running, we shall ever effect
“ Our errand ; and the time is deadly short.”

Again they filled the cup, and through the dawn
 Slow breaking, with impatient careful steps
 Held back their course, Cecht in his troubled mind
 Revolving how the child might bear his charge
 Behind him, when *his* turn should come for use
 Of both his hands to clear and keep that lane;
 When, in the faint light of the growing dawn,
 Casting his eyes to seaward, lo, the fleet
 Of Ingcel had set sail ; and, gazing next
 Up the dim slope before him, on the ridge
 Between him and Da-Derga's mansion, saw
 Rise into view a chariot-cavalcade
 And Conall Carnach in the foremost car.
 Behind him Cormac son of Conor came
 And Duftach bearing now a drooping spear,
 At head of all their sallying armament.
 Wild, pale, and shame-faced were the looks of all.
 As men who doubted did they dream or wake,
 Or were they honest, to be judged, or base.

"Cecht, we are late," said Conall, "we and thou.
 "He needs no more of drink who rides within."

"Is the king here?"

"'Tis here that was the king.

"We found him smothered under heaps of slain
 "In middle floor."

"Thou, Ferflath, take the cup

"And hold it to thy father's lips," said Cecht.

The child approached the cup ; the dying king
 Felt the soft touch and smiled, and drew a sigh ;

And, as they raised him in the chariot, died.

“A gentle and a generous king is gone,”
Said Cecht, and wept. “I take to witness all
“Here present, that I did not leave his side
“But by his own command. But how came ye,
“Choice men and champions of the warlike North,
“Tutors of old and samplars to our youth
“In loyalty and duty, how came ye
“To leave your lawful king alone to die?”

“Cecht,” answered Conall, “and thou, Ferflath,
know,—
“For these be things concern both old and young—
“We live not of ourselves. The heavenly Gods
“Who give to every man his share of life
“Here in this sphere of objects visible
“And things prehensible by hands of men,
“Though good and just they are, are not themselves
“The only unseen beings of the world.
“Spirits there are around us in the air
“And elvish creatures of the earth, now seen
“Now vanishing from sight; and we of these
“(But whether with, or whether without the will
“Of the just Gods I know not,) have to-night
“By strong enchantments and prevailing spells,—
“Though mean the agents and contemptible,—
“Been fooled and baffled in a darkling maze
“And kept abroad despite our better selves,
“From succour of our king. We were enough

"To have brushed them off as flies ; and while we
made
"Our sallies through them, bursting from the doors,
"We quelled them flat : but when these wicked
 sprites,—
"For now I know, men of the *Sidhs* they were—
"Who played their pipes before us, led us on
"Into the outer margin of the night,
"No man amongst us all could stay himself,
"Or keep from following ; and they kept us there,
"As men who walk asleep, in drowsy trance
"Listening a sweet pernicious melody,
"And following after in an idle round
"Till all was finished, and the plunderers gone.
"Haply they hear me, and the words I speak
"May bring their malice also upon me
"As late it fell on Conary. Yet, now
"The spell is off me, and I see the sun,
"By all my nation's swearing-Gods I swear
"I do defy them ; and appeal to you
"Beings of goodness perfect, and to Thee
"Great unknown Being who hadst made them all,
"Take ye compassion on the race of men ;
"And, for this slavery of *gaysh* and *sidh*
"Send down some emanation of yourselves
"To rule and comfort us ! And I have heard
"There come the tidings yet may make us glad
"Of such a one new born, or soon to be.
"Now, mount beside me, that with solemn rites
"We give the king, at Tara, burial."



THE HEALING OF CONALL CARNACH.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

[Conor is said to have heard of the Passion of our Lord from a Roman captain sent to demand tribute at Emania. He died of a wound inflicted by Keth, son of Magach, and nephew of Maev, with a ball from a sling; having been inveigled within reach of the missile by certain Connaught ladies. His son Forbaid characteristically avenged his death by the assassination of Maev, whom he slew, also with a sling, across the Shannon, while she was in the act of bathing. Notwithstanding the repulsive character of many of the acts ascribed to Conor, such as the cruel enforcement of the foot-race upon Macha (*O licentiam furoris, ægræ reipublicæ gemitu prosequendam!*) and the betrayal of the sons of Usnach, and abduction of Deirdré, the best part of Irish heroic tradition connects itself with his reign and period, preceding by nearly three centuries the epoch of Cormac Mac Art, and the Fenian or Irish Ossianic romances. The survivor of the men of renown of Conor's era was Conall Carnach, the hero of many picturesque legends, one of the most remarkable of which affords the groundwork for the following verses.]



'ER Slieve Few, with noiseless
tramping through the heavy-
drifted snow,
Beälcu,* Connacia's champion in
his chariot tracks the foe;
And anon far off discerneth, in
the mountain-hollow white,

* Pronounced Bayal-Kú.

Slinger Keth and Conall Carnach mingling, hand to hand in fight

Swift the charioteer his coursers urged across the wintry glade :

Hoarse the cry of Keth and hoarser seem'd to come demanding aid ;

But through wreath and swollen runnel ere the car could reach anigh,

Keth lay dead, and mighty Conall bleeding lay at point to die.

Whom beholding spent and pallid, Beälcu exulting cried,

“ Oh thou ravening wolf of Uladh, where is now thy northern pride ?

What can now that crest audacious, what that pale defiant brow,

Once the bale-star of Connacia's ravaged fields, avail thee now ? ”

“ Taunts are for reviling woman ; ” faintly Conall made reply :

“ Wouldst thou play the manlier foeman, end my pain and let me die.

Neither deem thy blade dishonour'd that with Keth's a deed it share,

For the foremost two of Connaught feat enough and fame to spare.”

"No, I will not ! bard shall never in Dunseverick hall
make boast

That to quell one northern riever needed two of
Croghan's host.

But because that word thou'st spoken, if but life enough
remains,

Thou shalt hear the wives of Croghan clap their hands
above thy chains.

"Yea, if life enough but linger, that the leech may
make thee whole,

Meet to satiate the anger that beseems a warrior's soul,
Best of leech-craft I'll purvey thee ; make thee whole
as healing can ;

And in single combat slay thee, Connaught man to
Ulster man."

Binding him in five-fold fetter, wrists and ankles,
wrists and neck,

To his car's uneasy litter Beälcu upheaved the wreck
Of the broken man and harness ; but he started with
amaze

When he felt the northern war-mace, what a weight it
was to raise.

Westward then through Breiffny's borders, with his
captive and his dead,

Track'd by bands of fierce applauders, wives and
shrieking widows, sped ;

And the chain'd heroic carcass on the fair-green of
Moy Slaught
Casting down, proclaim'd his purpose, and bade Lee
the leech be brought.

Lee, the gentle-faced physician from his herb-plot
came, and said,

“Healing is with God's permission: health for life's
enjoyment made:

And though I mine aid refuse not, yet, to speak my
purpose plain,

I the healing art abuse not, making life enure to pain.

“But assure me, with the sanction of the mightiest
oath ye know,

That in case, in this contention, Conall overcome his
foe,

Straight departing from the tourney by what path the
chief shall choose,

He is free to take his journey unmolested to the Fews.

“Swear me further, while at healing in my charge the
hero lies,

None shall through my fences stealing, work him
mischief or surprise;

So, if God the undertaking but approve, in six months'
span

Once again my art shall make him meet to stand before
a man.”

Crom their god they then attested, Sun and Wind for
guarantees,
Conall Carnach unmolested by what exit he might
please,
If the victor should have freedom to depart Connacia's
bounds ;
Meantime, no man should intrude him entering on
the hospice grounds.

Then his burden huge receiving in the hospice-portal,
Lee,
Stiffen'd limb by limb relieving with the iron fetter key,
As a crumpled scroll unroll'd him, groaning deep, till
laid at length,
Wondering gazers might behold him, what a tower he
was of strength.

Spake the sons to one another, day by day, of Beälcu—
“Get thee up and spy, my brother, what the leech and
northman do.”
“Lee, at mixing of a potion : Conall, yet in no wise
dead,
As on reef of rock the ocean, tosses wildly on his bed.”

“Spy again with cautious peeping : what of Lee and
Conall now ?”
“Conall lies profoundly sleeping : Lee beside with
placid brow.”

“And to-day?” “To-day he’s risen ; pallid as his swathing sheet,
He has left his chamber’s prison, and is walking on his feet.”

“And to-day?” “A ghastly figure on his javelin propp’d he goes.”

“And to-day?” “A languid vigour through his larger gesture shows.”

“And to-day?” “The blood renewing mantles all his clear cheek through.”

“Would thy vow had room for rueing, rashly-valiant Beälcu !”

So with herb and healing balsam, ere the second month was past,

Life’s additions smooth and wholesome circling through his members vast,

As you’ve seen a sere oak burgeon under summer showers and dew,

Conall, under his chirurgeon, fill’d and flourish’d, spread and grew.

“I can bear the sight no longer : I have watch’d him moon by moon :

Day by day the chief grows stronger : giant-strong he will be soon.

Oh my sire, rash-valiant warrior ! but that oaths have
built the wall,
Soon these feet should leap the barrier : soon this hand
thy fate forestall."

" Brother, have the wish thou'st utter'd ; we have
sworn, so let it be ;

But although our feet be fetter'd, all the air is left us
free.

Dying Keth with vengeful presage did bequeath thee
sling and ball,

And the sling may send its message where thy vagrant
glances fall.

" Forbaid was a master-slinger : Maev, when in her
bath she sank,

Felt the presence of his finger from the further Shannon
bank ;

For he threw by line and measure, practising a constant
cast

Daily in secluded leisure, till he reach'd the mark at
last.

" Keth achieved a warrior's honour, though 'twas mid
a woman's band,

When he smote the amorous Conor bowing from his
distant stand.

Fit occasion will not fail ye: in the leech's lawn
below,
Conall at the fountain daily drinks within an easy
throw."

" Wherefore cast ye at the apple, sons of mine, with
measured aim ? "

" He who in the close would grapple, first the distant
foe should maim.

And since Keth, his death-balls casting, rides no more
the ridge of war,

We, against our summer hosting, train us for his vacant
car."

" Wherefore to the rock repairing, gaze ye forth, my
children, tell."

" 'Tis a stag we watch for snaring, that frequents the
leech's well."

" I will see this stag, though, truly, small may be my
eye's delight."

And he climb'd the rock where fully lay the lawn
exposed to sight.

Conall to the green well-margin came at dawn and
knelt to drink,

Thinking how a noble virgin by a like green fountain's
brink

Heard his own pure vows one morning, far away and long ago :

All his heart to home was turning ; and his tears began to flow.

Clean forgetful of his prison, steep Dunseverick's windy tower

Seem'd to rise in present vision, and his own dear lady's bower.

Round the sheltering knees they gather, little ones of tender years,—

Tell us mother of our father—and she answers but with tears.

Twice the big drops splash'd the fountain. Then he rose, and turning round,

As across a breast of mountain sweeps a whirlwind o'er the ground

Raced in athlete-seats amazing, swung the war-mace, hurl'd the spear ;

Beälcu, in wonder gazing, felt the pangs of deadly fear.

Had it been a fabled griffin, suppled in a fasting den,

Flash'd its wheeling coils to heaven o'er a wreck of beasts and men,

Hardly had the dreadful prospect bred his soul more
dire alarms ;
Such the fire of Conall's aspect, such the stridor of
his arms !

" This is fear," he said, " that never shook these
limbs of mine till now.

Now I see the mad endeavour ; now I mourn the
boastful vow.

Yet 'twas righteous wrath impell'd me ; and a sense
of manly shame

From his naked throat withheld me when 'twas offer'd
to my aim.

" Now I see his strength excelling : whence he buys
it : what he pays :

Tis a God who has a dwelling in the fount, to whom
he prays.

Thither came he weeping, drooping, till the Well-God
heard his prayer :

Now behold him, soaring, swooping, as an eagle
through the air.

" O thou God, by whatsoever sounds of awe thy name
we know,

Grant thy servant equal favour with the stranger and
the foe !

Equal grace, 'tis all I covet ; and if sacrificial blood
Win thy favour, thou shalt have it on thy very well-
brink, God !

“ What and though I've given pledges not to cross the
leech's court ?

Not to pass his sheltering hedges, meant I to his
patient's hurt.

Thy dishonour meant I never : never meant I to fore-
swear

Right divine of prayer wherever Power divine invites
to prayer.

“ Sun that warm'st me, Wind that fann'st me, ye that
guarantee the oath,

Make no sign of wrath against me : tenderly ye touch
me both.

Yea, then, through his fences stealing ere to-morrow's
sun shall rise,

Well-God ! on thy margin kneeling, I will offer sacri-
fice.”

“ Brother, rise, the skies grow ruddy : if we yet would
save our sire,

Rests a deed courageous, bloody, wondering ages shall
admire :

Hie thee to the spy-rock's summit : ready there thou'l
find the sling ;
Ready there the leaden plummet ; and at dawn he
seeks the spring."

Ruddy dawn had changed to amber : radiant as the
yellow day,
Conall issuing from his chamber, to the fountain took
his way :
There, athwart the welling water, like a fallen pillar,
spread,
Smitten by the bolt of slaughter, lay Connacia's
champion dead.

Call the hosts ! convene the judges ! cite the dead
man's children both !—
Said the judges, " He gave pledges ; Sun and Wind ;
and broke the oath,
And they slew him : so we've written : let his sons
attend our words."
" Both, by sudden frenzy smitten, fell at sunrise on
their swords."

Then the judges, " Ye who punish man's prevaricating
vow,
Needs not further to admonish : contrite to their will
we bow,

All our points of promise keeping : safely let the chief
go forth."

Conall to his chariot leaping, turned his coursers to
the north :

In the Sun that swept the valleys, in the Wind's
encircling flight,

Recognizing holy allies, guardians of the Truth and
Right ;

While, before his face, resplendent with a firm faith's
candid ray,

Dazzled troops of foes attendant, bow'd before him on
his way.

But the calm physician, viewing where the white neck
join'd the ear,

Said, " It is a slinger's doing : Sun nor Wind was
actor here.

Yet till God vouchsafe more certain knowledge of his
sovereign will,

Better deem the mystic curtain hides their wonted
demons still.

" Better so, perchance, than living in a clearer light,
like me,

But believing where perceiving, bound in what I hear
and see ;

Force and change in constant sequence, changing
atoms, changeless laws ;
Only in submissive patience waiting access to the
Cause.

“ And they say, Centurion Altus, when he to Emania
came,

And to Rome’s subjection call’d us, urging Cæsar’s
tribute claim,

Told that half the world barbarian thrills already with
the faith

Taught them by the godlike Syrian Cæsar lately put
to death

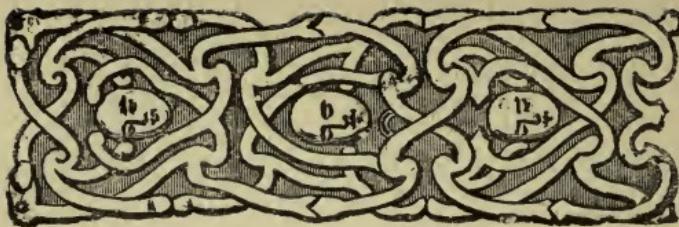
“ And the Sun, through starry stages measuring from
the Ram and Bull,

Tells us of renewing Ages, and that Nature’s time is
full :

So, perchance, these silly breezes even now may swell
the sail,

Brings the leavening word of Jesus westward also to
the Gael.”



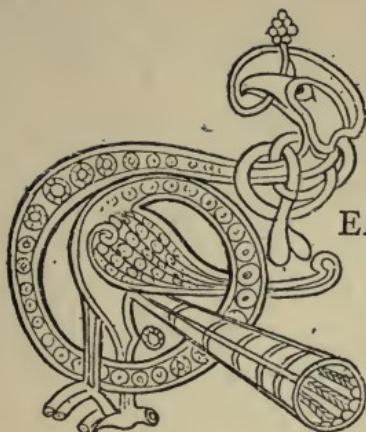


THE TAIN-QUEST.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

[The *Tain*, in Irish Bardic phrase, was an heroic poem commemorative of a foray or plundering expedition on a grander scale. It was the duty of the bard to be prepared, at call, with all the principal *Tains*, among which the *Tain-Bo-Cuailgne*, or Cattle-Spoil of Quelgny, occupied the first place; as in it were recorded the exploits of all the personages most famous in the earlier heroic cycle of Irish story,—Conor Mac Nessa, Maev, Fergus Mac Roy, Conall Carnach, and Cuchullin.

The earliest copies of the *Tain-Bo-Cuailgne* are prefaced by the wild legend of its loss and recovery in the time of Guaty, King of Connaught, in the sixth century, by Murgen, son of the chief poet Sanchan, under circumstances which have suggested the following poem. The Ogham characters referred to in the piece, were formed by lines cut tally-wise on the corners of stone pillars, and somewhat resembled Scandinavian Runes, examples of which, carved on squared staves, may still be seen in several museums. The readers of the *Tain-Bo-Cuailgne*, as it now exists, have to regret the overlaying of much of its heroic and pathetic material by turgid extravagances and exaggerations, the additions apparently of later copyists.]



THE TAIN-QUEST.

EAR the cup to Sanchan Tor-
pest ; yield the bard
his poet's meed ;
What we've heard was but
a foretaste ; lays more
lofty now succeed.

Though my stores be emptied well-nigh, twin bright
cups there yet remain,—
Win them with the Raid of Cuailgne ; chaunt us,
Bard, the famous *Tain* ! ”

Thus, in hall of Gort, spake Guary ; for the king, let
truth be told,
Bounteous though he was, was weary giving goblets,
giving gold,
Giving aught the bard demanded ; but, when for the
Tain he call'd,
Sanchan from his seat descended ; shame and anger
fired the Scald.

“ Well,” he said, “ 'tis known through Erin; known
through Alba, main and coast,
Since the Staff-Book's disappearing over sea, the *Tain*
is lost :

For the lay was cut in tallies on the corners of the
staves

Patrick in his pilgrim galleys carried o'er the Ictian
waves.

"Well 'tis known that Erin's Ollaves, met in Tara
Luachra's hall,

Fail'd to find the certain knowledge of the *Tain*
amongst them all,

Though there there sat sages hoary, men who in their
day had known

All the foremost kings of story ; but the lay was lost
and gone.

"Wherefore from that fruitless session went I forth
myself in quest

Of the *Tain*; nor intermission, even for hours of
needful rest,

Gave I to my sleepless searches, till I Erin, hill and
plain,

Courts and castles, cells and churches, roam'd and
ransack'd, but in vain.

"Dreading shame on bardship branded, should I e'er
be put to own

Any lay of right demanded of me was not rightly
known,

Over sea to Alba sped I, where, amid the hither
Gael,
Dalriad bards had fill'd already all Cantyre with song
and tale.

" Who the friths and fords shall reckon ; who the
steeps I cross'd shall count,
From the cauldron-pool of Brecon eastward o'er the
Alban mount ;
From the stone fort of Dun Britan, set o'er circling
Clyde on high,
Northward to the thunder-smitten, jagg'd Cuchullin
peaks of Skye ?

" Great Cuchullin's name and glory fill'd the land
from north to south ;
Deirdré's and Clan Usnach's story rife I found in
every mouth ;
Yea, and where the whitening surges spread below
the Herdsman Hill,
Echoes of the shout of Fergus haunted all Glen Etive
still.

" Echoes of the shout of warning heard by Usnach's
exiled youths,
When, between the night and morning, sleeping in
their hunting booths,

Deirdré dreamt the death-bird hooted ; Naisi, waking
wild with joy,
Cried, ‘ A man of Erin shouted ! welcome Fergus
son of Roy ! ’

“ Wondrous shout, from whence repeated, even as up
the answering hills

Echo’s widening wave proceeded, spreads the sound
of song that fills

All the echoing waste of ages, tale and lay and choral
strain,

But the chief delight of sages and of kings was still
the *Tain*,

“ Made when mighty Maev invaded Cuailgna for her
brown-bright bull ;

Fergus was the man that made it, for he saw the war
in full,

And in Maev’s own chariot mounted, sang what pass’d
before his eyes,

As you’d hear it now recounted, knew I but where
Fergus lies.

“ Bear me witness, Giant Bouchaill, herdsman of the
mountain drove,

How with spell and spirit-struggle many a midnight
hour I strove

Back to life to call the author ! for before I'd hear it
said,

Neither Sanchan knew it,' rather would I learn it
from the dead ;

" Ay, and pay the dead their teaching with the one
price spirits crave,

When the hand of magic, reaching past the barriers of
the grave,

Drags the struggling phantom lifeward :—but the
Ogham on his stone

Still must mock us undecipher'd ; grave and lay alike
unknown.

" So that put to shame the direst, here I stand and
own, O King,

Thou a lawful lay requirest Sanchan Torpest cannot
sing.

Take again the gawds you gave me,—cup nor crown
no more will I ;—

Son, from further insult save me : lead me hence, and
let me die."

Leaning on young Murgen's shoulder—Murgen was
his youngest son—

Jeer'd of many a lewd beholder, Sanchan from the
hall has gone :

But, when now beyond Loch Lurgan, three days thence
he reach'd his home,

" Give thy blessing, Sire," said Murgen.—" Whither
wouldst thou, son?"—“ To Rome ;

“ Rome, or, haply, Tours of Martin; wheresoever over
ground

Hope can deem that tidings certain of the lay may yet
be found."

Answered Eimena his brother, " Not alone thou leav'st
the west,

Though thou ne'er shouldst find another, I'll be
comrade of the quest."

Eastward, breadthwise, over Erin straightway travell'd
forth the twain,

Till with many days' wayfaring Murgen fainted by
Loch Ein :

“ Dear my brother, thou art weary : I for present aid
am flown :

Thou for my returning tarry here beside this Standing
Stone."

Shone the sunset red and solemn : Murgen, where he
leant, observed

Down the corners of the column letter-strokes of
Ogham carved

“ ‘Tis, belike, a burial pillar,” said he, “ and these shallow lines
Hold some warrior’s name of valour, could I rightly spell the signs.”

Letter then by letter tracing, soft he breathed the sound of each ;
Sound and sound then interlacing, lo, the signs took form of speech ;
And with joy and wonder mainly thrilling, part a-thrill with fear,
Murgen read the legend plainly, “ FERGUS, SON OF ROY IS HERE.”

“ Lo,” said he “ my quest is ended, knew I but the spell to say ;
Underneath my feet extended, lies the man that made the lay :
Yet, though spell nor incantation know I, were the words but said
That could speak my soul’s elation, I, methinks, could raise the dead.

“ Be an arch-bard’s name my warrant. Murgen, son of Sanchan, here,
Vow’d upon a venturous errand to the door-sills of Saint Pierre,

Where, beyond Slieve Alpa's barrier, sits the Coärb
of the keys,

I conjure thee, buried warrior, rise and give my
wanderings ease.

“ ‘Tis not death whose forms appalling strew the
steep with pilgrim’s graves,

‘Tis not fear of snow-slips falling, nor of ice-clefts’
azure caves

Daunts me ; but I dread if Romeward I must travel
till the *Tain*

Crowns my quest, these footsteps homeward I shall
never turn again.

“ I at parting left behind me aged sire and mother
dear ;

Who a parent’s love shall find me ere again I ask it
here ?

Dearer too than sire or mother, ah, how dear these
tears may tell,

I, at parting, left another ; left a maid who loves me
well.

“ Ruthful clay, thy rigours soften ! Fergus, hear, thy
deaf heaps through,

Thou, thyself a lover often, aid a lover young and
true !

Thou, the favourite of maidens, for a fair young
maiden's sake,
I conjure thee by the radiance of thy Nessa's eyes,
awake !

" Needs there adjuration stronger ? Fergus, thou hadst
once a son :
Even than I was Illan younger when the glorious feat
was done,—
When in hall of Red Branch biding Deirdré and Clan
Usnach sate,
In thy guarantee confiding, though the foe was at their
gate.

" Though their guards were bribed and flying, and
their door-posts wrapp'd in flame,
Calmly on thy word relying bent they o'er the chess-
man game,
Till with keen words sharp and grievous Deirdré cried
through smoke and fire,
'See the sons of Fergus leave us : traitor sons of traitor
sire !'

" Mild the eyes that did upbraid her, when young Illan
rose and spake,
'If my father be a traitor ; if my brother for the
sake

Of a bribe bewray his virtue, yet while lives the sword
I hold,
Illan Finn will not desert you, not for fire and not for
gold !'

" And as hawk that strikes on pigeons, sped on wrath's
unswerving wing
Through the tyrant's leaguering legions, smiting chief
and smiting king,
Smote he full on Conor's gorget, till the waves of
welded steel
Round the monarch's magic target rang their loudest
larum peal.

" Rang the disc where wizard hammers, mingling in
the wavy field,
Tempest-wail and breaker-clamours, forged the won-
drous Ocean shield,
Answering to whose stormy noises, oft as clang'd by
deadly blows,
All the echoing kindred voices of the seas of Erin
rose.

" Moan'd each sea-chafed promontory ; soar'd and
wail'd white Cleena's wave ;
Rose the Tonn of Inver Rory, and through column'd
chasm and cave

Reaching deep with roll of anger, till Dunseverick's
dungeons reel'd,
Roar'd responsive to the clangour struck from Conor's
magic shield.

" Ye, remember, red wine quaffing in Dunseverick's
halls of glee,
Heard the moaning, heard the chafing, heard the
thundering from the sea ;
Knew that peril compass'd Conor, came, and on
Emania's plain
Found his fraud and thy dishonour ; Deirdré ravish'd
Illan slain.

" Now by love of son for father,—son, who ere he'd
hear it said—
' Neither Sanchan knew it,' rather seeks to learn it
from the dead ;
Rise, and give me back the story that the twin gold
cups shall win ;
Rise, recount the great Cow-Foray ! rise for love of
Illan Finn !

" Still he stirs not. Love of woman thou regard'st
not Fergus, now :
Love of children, instincts human, care for these no
more hast thou :

Wider comprehensions, deeper insights to the dead
belong :—

Since for Love thou wakest not, sleeper, yet awake
for sake of Song !

“ Thou, the first in rhythmic cadence dressing life’s
discordant tale,

Wars of chiefs and loves of maidens, gavest the Poem
to the Gael ;

Now they’ve lost their noblest measure, and in dark
days hard at hand,

Song shall be the only treasure left them in their
native land.

“ Not for selfish gawds or baubles dares my soul
disturb the graves :

Love consoles, but song ennobles ; songless men are
meet for slaves :

Fergus, for the Gael’s sake, waken ! never let the
scornful Gauls

‘Mongst our land’s reproaches reckon lack of Song
within our halls ! ’

Fergus rose. A mist ascended with him, and a flash
was seen

As of brazen sandals blended with a mantle’s wafture
green ;

But so thick the cloud closed o'er him, Eimena,
return'd at last,
Found not on the field before him but a mist-heap
grey and vast.

Thrice to pierce the hoar recesses faithful Eimena
essay'd ;
Thrice through foggy wildernesses back to open air
he stray'd ;
Till a deep voice through the vapours fill'd the
twilight far and near,
And the Night her starry tapers kindling, stoop'd from
heaven to hear.

Seem'd as though the skiey Shepherd back to earth
had cast the fleece
Envying gods of old caught upward from the dark-
ening shrines of Greece ;
So the white mists curl'd and glisten'd, so from
heaven's expanses bare,
Stars enlarging lean'd and listen'd down the emptied
depths of air.

All night long by mists surrounded Murgen lay in
vapoury bars ;
All night long the deep voice sounded 'neath the keen,
enlarging stars :

But when, on the orient verges, stars grew dim and
mists retired,
Rising by the stone of Fergus, Murgen stood a man
inspired.

“ Back to Sanchan !—Father, hasten, ere the hour of
power be past,

Ask not how obtain’d but listen to the lost lay found
at last !”

“ Yea, these words have tramp of heroes in them ;
and the marching rhyme

Rolls the voices of the Era’s down the echoing steeps
of Time.”

Not till all was thrice related, thrice recital full essay’d,
Sad and shame-faced, worn and faded, Murgen sought
the faithful maid.

“ Ah, so haggard ; ah, so altered ; thou in life and love
so strong !”

“ Dearly purchased,” Murgen falter’d, “ life and love
I’ve sold for song !”

“ Woe is me, the losing bargain ! what can song the
dead avail ?”

“ Fame immortal,” murmur’d Murgen, “ long as lay
delights the Gael.”

"Fame, alas ! the price thou chargest not repays one
virgin tear."

"Yet the proud revenge I've purchased for my sire, I
deem not dear."

So, again to Gort the splendid, when the drinking
boards were spread,

Sanchan, as of old attended, came and sat at table-
head.

"Bear the cup to Sanchan Torpest : twin gold goblets,
Bard, are thine,

If with voice and string thou harpest, *Tain-Bo-*
Cuailgne, line for line."

"Yea, with voice and string I'll chant it." Murgen to
his father's knee

Set the harp : no prelude wanted, Sanchan struck the
master key,

And, as bursts the brimful river all at once from caves
of Cong,

Forth at once, and once for ever, leap'd the torrent of
the song.

Floating on a brimful torrent, men go down and banks
go by :

Caught adown the lyric current, Guary, captured, ear
and eye,

Heard no more the courtiers jeering, saw no more the walls of Gort,
Creeve Roe's meeds instead appearing, and Emania's royal fort.

Vision chasing splendid vision, Sanchan roll'd the rhythmic scene ;
They that mock'd in lewd derision now, at gaze, with wondering mien.
Sate, and, as the glorying master sway'd the tightening reins of song,
Felt emotion's pulses faster—fancies faster bound along.

Pity dawn'd on savage faces, when for love of captive Crunn,
Macha, in the ransom-races, girt her gravid loins, to run
'Gainst the fleet Ultonian horses ; and, when Deirdra on the road
Headlong dash'd her 'mid the corses, brimming eye-lids overflow'd.

Light of manhood's generous ardour, under brows relaxing shone ;
When, mid-ford, on Uladh's border, young Cuchullin stood alone,

Maev and all her hosts notwithstanding:—"Now, for
love of knightly play,
Yield the youth his soul's demanding; let the hosts
their marchings stay,

"Till the death he craves be given; and, upon his
burial stone
Champion-praises duly graven, make his name and
glory known;
For, in speech-containing token, age to ages never
gave
Salutation better spoken, than, 'Behold a hero's
grave.'"

What, another and another, and he still for combat
calls?
Ah, the lot on thee, his brother sworn in arms, Ferdia,
falls;
And the hall with wild applauses sobb'd like woman
ere they wist,
When the champions in the pauses of the deadly
combat kiss'd.

Now, for love of land and cattle, while Cuchullin in
the fords
Stays the march of Connaught's battle, ride and rouse
the Northern Lords;

Swift as angry eagles wing them toward the plunder'd
eyrie's call,

Thronging from Dun Dealga bring them, bring them
from the Red Branch hall !

Heard ye not the tramp of armies ? Hark ! amid the
sudden gloom,

'Twas the stroke of Conall's war-mace sounded through
the startled room ;

And, while still the hall grew darker, king and courtier
chill'd with dread,

Heard the rattling of the war-car of Cuchullin over-
head.

Half in wonder, half in terror, loth to stay and loth to
fly,

Seem'd to each beglamour'd hearer shades of kings
went thronging by :

But the troubled joy of wonder merged at last in
mastering fear,

As they heard through pealing thunder, "FERGUS,
SON OF ROY IS HERE!"

Brazen-sandall'd vapour-shrouded, moving in an icy
blast,

Through the doorway terror-crowded, up the tables
Fergus pass'd :—

"Stay thy hand, oh harper, pardon ! cease the wild
unearthly lay !

Murgen, bear thy sire his guerdon.” Murgen sat, a shape of clay.

“ Bear him on his bier beside me : never more in halls of Gort

Shall a niggard king deride me : slaves, of Sanchan make their sport !

But because the maiden’s yearnings needs must also be condoled,

Hers shall be the dear-bought earnings, hers the twin-bright cups of gold.”

“ Cups,” she cried “ of bitter drinking, fling them far as arm can throw !

Let them in the ocean sinking, out of sight and memory go !

Let the joinings of the rhythm, let the links of sense and sound

Of the *Tain-Bo* perish with them, lost as though they’d ne’er been found ! ”

So it comes, the lay, recover’d once at such a deadly cost,

Ere one full recital suffer’d, once again is all but lost : For, the maiden’s malediction still with many a blemish-stain

Clings in coarser garb of fiction round the fragments that remain.

The New Irish Library.

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ASSISTED BY

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